

The U.S. Canada Mexico Trilateral Summit: North American Integration and the Ties That Bind

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After a two year hiatus, the leaders of the U.S., Canada and Mexico are set to meet for a trilateral summit. While the push for further North American integration continues incrementally, at this time, it is unlikely that discussions will yield any grand new initiatives that involve the participation of all three NAFTA partners. Instead, the meeting could be used to build off of bilateral discussions already underway. This includes negotiations between the U.S. and Canada on a North American Security perimeter deal designed to accelerate the flow of people and goods across the border.

In an article from several months back, Robert Pastor, who has been a leading proponent of continental integration, emphasized that [Obama's jobs strategy should be a North American one](#). He explained how the U.S. can expand trade faster by focusing on its neighbours and also pointed out that few Americans realize just how dependent the U.S. is on Canada and Mexico. In order to facilitate this approach, Pastor recommended, "We should eliminate restrictive 'rules of origin,' which add a tax as high as the tariff that was eliminated by NAFTA, and combine, rather than duplicate, customs' forms, personnel and frequent-traveler programs." He also called on President Obama to, "expand his infrastructure fund to be a North American one, with contributions from all three countries." Pastor went on to say, "The leaders of each nation should then instruct their transportation ministers to develop a North American plan for transportation and infrastructure that would include another trade corridor from the busiest transit point in Windsor, Ontario, to southern Mexico." This sounds a lot like plans for a NAFTA superhighway.

In his op-ed, Robert Pastor also stated, "In 2009, the three leaders of North America pledged to meet the next year, but that still hasn't happened. Obama should invite his counterparts to address the full North American agenda, beginning with a strategy to lift the continent's economy and then addressing transportation, immigration, education and borders. The goal should be to forge a North American community." Pastor may have gotten part of his wish as President Barack Obama will host the [North American Leaders Summit](#) in Honolulu, Hawaii on November 13, 2011 which will include the participation of Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper and Mexican President Felipe Calderon. The meeting is expected to focus on economic, energy, environmental and security issues. The setting could also provide an excellent opportunity for the U.S. and Canada to release an action plan that stems from [bilateral trade and security perimeter talks](#) that were launched back in February. Both countries could also further discuss the pending [Keystone XL oil pipeline](#) which would span from western Canada to Texas. President Obama has now indicated that a final decision on the project may not take place until sometime next year.

While the U.S. and Canada have been busy putting the final touches on the proposed Beyond the Border agreement, a series of unwelcome distractions have caused the initiative to lose some of its momentum. In September, a U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) agency [draft report](#) recommended the use of fencing and other barriers on the northern border. This ties into an [assessment](#) from last year by the Government Accountability Office which warned that only a small portion of the Canadian border was under operational control and even went so far as to claim that it posed a greater threat than the southern border. Although the CBP denied that a fence is being considered at this time, it does reveal that in many ways, the U.S. still thinks in terms of a two border policy with the idea of a security perimeter around the U.S. and another one around North America.

The timing of a number of protectionist measures have also proven to be a stumbling block. First, there was the [Buy American](#) provision which is included in Obama's jobs creation plan. This was followed by the announcement that Canadian travellers will have to [pay a \\$5.50 tax](#) when they enter the U.S. by air or sea. Not to mention the threat of [new tariffs on container cargo](#) entering U.S. ports from Canada. The moves prompted Roland Paris to ask in his article, [Is There a Problem in Canada-U.S. Relations?](#) He acknowledged that it is, "noteworthy that several of these irritants have appeared at this time, when Canada and the U.S. are negotiating the terms of a new partnership. We are left with unanswered questions: Is the White House still committed to elaborating and pursuing a renewed agenda of bilateral cooperation?" The protectionist actions go against what both countries are supposedly trying to accomplish. They have proved to be a source of contention and reinforce Canada's perceived weakness when dealing with its American partner.

In their article, [Sad but true: Canada and Mexico have no clout in Washington](#), Stephen Clarkson and Matto Mildenberger argued that both countries are more valuable to the U.S. economy than most people realize. They pointed out that, "although Canada and Mexico make extraordinarily large contributions to America's economic strength, homeland security and international effectiveness, they have virtually no influence in Washington's corridors of power." One of the reasons given deals with the way, "the U.S. has shaped the governance structures within which continental policy processes play out – including disempowering any institutions that could give the continental periphery a voice in affecting American policies." When it comes to Canada's lack of influence, they contend that it centers around its willingness to, "make almost any concession in order to get access to the U.S. market. Their resulting limp bargaining culture causes Ottawa's negotiators to back off from confrontations, then claim the resulting compromises as victories." There are fears that the same could happen with negotiations on a perimeter security agreement with the U.S., resulting in Canada giving up more than it gains.

When it comes to foreign policy matters, Clarkson and Mildenberger also noted that even though at times Canada and Mexico have proven to be an essential support for achieving U.S. aims, it still doesn't translate into political influence. They added, "When it comes to security, Canada's and Mexico's land masses are a potential menace, since they could be used by terrorist organizations to infiltrate the United States. But this proximity also turns the Canadian and Mexican governments into Washington's prime associates in its war on terrorism, as they are in its war on drugs." In many ways, both of these wars have morphed together and are being used as the pretext for a North American security perimeter. Growing drug violence and insecurity have allowed the U.S. to assume more control over Mexican security priorities and intelligence operations. The [Merida Initiative](#) which promotes a perimeter security strategy continues to deepen U.S.-Mexico relations. At some point,

Mexico could join the U.S. and Canada as part of a formal, common security perimeter arrangement.

There is no doubt that protectionist measures, along with other factors have put a bit of a damper on the pending U.S.-Canada security perimeter agreement. If the Beyond the Border action plan is not announced by the end of the year, the whole effort could collapse. From the Canadian government's perspective, it is essential to get some sort of deal done before the election year primaries begin in the U.S. or risk possible failure. Despite all the delays and obstacles, it is believed that the overdue action plan will soon be released. Having said that, it is now expected that it will be more modest than what was initially envisioned and for the time being will avoid some of the more contentious issues. It is also likely to include built-in structures to ensure that things happen on schedule with a list of items that both countries will pursue over the coming years. This will result in a constant implementation process making the move towards a North American security perimeter an incremental one.

When it comes to continental integration, much of the focus has shifted to greater convergence bilaterally which over time could move back to a more trilateral approach. There is an overwhelming sense that one way or another, the U.S. is going to get a North American security perimeter on their own terms, one that its NAFTA partners will have to conform to, whether they like it or not.

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