

NORAD: Still at the Crossroads?

By Grant McDonald and Dan Doran



How relevant is NORAD today?

‘Extremely’ should be the collective view, although it is not always the obvious one.

The importance of NORAD in light of emerging geopolitical threats is critical in ensuring the defence and security of North American and Canadian sovereignty.ⁱ

Whether Canada will have a key role in determining NORAD’s future isn’t entirely clear. The decision in the early part of this century not to join the U.S.’s ballistic missile defence (BMD) program effectively froze Canada out of a large portion of NORAD’s continental defence. Canada has little to no voice or influence over the BMD of North America and continues to hang on to the dated and increasingly obsolete assertions that the U.S. would intervene in a ballistic missile attack on Canada.

While Canada should play a significant role in shaping NORAD’s future, much will depend on well-informed decisions and the timely actions made in the near term. Canadians can no longer cling to the assumptions of the past nor kick the can further down the road.



Ballistic Missile Defence

In a recent podcast with the CDA Institute, Vice-Admiral (Ret’d) Bob Davidson, Canada’s former military representative at NATO, noted the first issue that ought to be included in NORAD modernization is BMD.

“There’s no reason why Canada shouldn’t be all over BMD. We’re going to have this level of capability going into the Canadian Surface Combatants,” he explained. “It opens the question, to what extent we’re putting maritime elements into continental defence...”

The world has changed dramatically since NORAD was first established in 1958, and our defence systems need to keep pace. Delaying investment in new technologies and capabilities, such as advanced radar systems and artificial intelligence (AI) create potentially grave downstream risks. The Canadian defence industry will need to collaborate closely with American counterparts to make a meaningful contribution in these areas. Moreover, the federal government will need to find ways

to engage with the defence sector earlier and more often and most importantly with a view to making transformative change.

This all comes with a hefty price tag, and budget constraints (and likely cost overruns) are a major concern. The \$38.6-billion funding commitment announced in 2022 to modernize NORAD is to be spent over the next two decades.ⁱⁱ While this is the largest investment in Canada’s NORAD capabilities in a generation, whether it actually gets spent is subject to political will remaining constant over that period, which clearly is not guaranteed.

Another challenge is the changing nature of threats. In the past, NORAD was primarily focused on detecting and intercepting manned aircraft. Today, Canada also needs to be prepared for unmanned drones, hypersonic weapons, cyberattacks, and even space-based threats. The spy balloon incidents from last year exposed gaps in NORAD’s ability to detect potential threats in real time.



The Arctic

The Arctic is becoming increasingly important due to climate change and the potential for new shipping routes and resource extraction, requiring the need for enhanced surveillance and defense capabilities in the region. Yet, we lack much-needed infrastructure in the North.

Relevant investments are being made. Canada recently announced plans to buy remotely piloted drones to help the RCAF conduct long-distance surveillance. The acquisition includes ground control stations, a ground control centre, new aircraft hangars, weapons, and training technology.

The first drones are expected to be delivered in 2028 – nearly 30 years after they were first proposed -- and the program will only be at full operational capability by 2033.ⁱⁱⁱ

The federal government also finalized an agreement to buy up to 16 P-8A Poseidon aircraft for the air force to replace the aging CP-140 Aurora fleet.

These are all positive developments. But to quote VAdm (Ret'd) Davidson, "A substantial investment needs to be made here and we're thinking along the lines of how to tinker to put a little money here and a little money there

to give the Americans a warm and fuzzy that we're actually investing across defence... and we're barely scratching the surface."

Yet, he acknowledges that even if DND was given a significant amount of funding, it may lack the personnel and agile procurement policies that would enable it to leap forward quickly. There needs to be "a reasonable plan" and a firm commitment. "Money is a key element of real commitment," he says.

The joint defence of North America is vital to the security of both nations, and whatever Canada and the U.S. say publicly about NORAD and the actions that are ultimately taken in modernizing it will no doubt be carefully watched by potentially hostile countries. What's needed is a fully integrated approach developed and implemented by both countries.

It is clear that a forward-thinking approach to defence, careful diplomacy, and force of character are required.

This is a challenge that we believe must be faced head on.



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ⁱ Michael Hirsch, "We Are Now in a Global Cold War", Foreign Policy, June 27, 2022

ⁱⁱ Government of Canada, Fact sheet: Funding for Continental Defence and NORAD modernization, July 21, 2022

ⁱⁱⁱ Murray Brewster, "Canadian military buying armed drones for \$2.49B", CBC News, Dec. 19, 2023

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