

Policy

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Modernizing 'We Have the Watch': Opportunities for Canada Within the Current Continental Defence Partnership

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Introduction

Canada needs to increase its involvement in existing North American continental defence initiatives and to assert its priorities and interests within its partnership with the United States. Greater Canadian leadership in continental defence starts with fulfilling plans to modernize the North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD).

The Department of National Defence (DND) should conduct a review to determine how to best allocate its resources in order to reach continental defence objectives outlined in its 2017 Strong, Secure, Engaged policy. Such a reassessment is necessary to ensure that Canada can still meet its priorities of protecting North America and its northern national sovereignty in a strategic context marked by the global COVID-19 pandemic. The review should address:

1. issues of operation modernization that includes cyber capacity-building;
2. new roles for the CAF within Canada; and
3. the need for increased emphasis on long-term investments in capabilities to support Canadian sovereignty, especially in the Arctic.

The North American threat environment is complex and rapidly evolving. It calls for innovative policy solutions including the modernization of NORAD and other existing bilateral frameworks. The US-Canada partnership provides opportunities for Canada to identify and act upon these threats in order to achieve its national and continental defence objectives.

Contextualizing the Changing Threat Environment

Securing North America: Canadian defence policy establishes a vision in which the country is “secure in North America, active in a renewed defence partnership in NORAD and with the United States”¹. To achieve this fundamental objective, Canada needs to enhance bilateral collaboration with its American partner to be “positioned to deter and defend against threats to the continent”².

NORAD/NWS at a crossroad: NORAD saw its last major update in 2006 with the addition of the maritime warning mission. The binational institution is due for a major modernization, as promised by the Canadian government in 2017. This included an update of the North Warning System (NWS), which is set to expire in 2025. American and Canadian military leaders reached an agreement on the broad strokes of NORAD modernization in 2019. The details and funding requirements remain to be determined by Ottawa and Washington.

Canadian Armed Forces and the COVID-19 pandemic: The COVID-19 pandemic has altered the global security environment and will have lasting impacts on Canadian Armed Forces’ (CAF) roles and responsibilities abroad, in North America, and at home. In light of the pandemic, the CAF had to adjust several of their international missions to mitigate the spread of the virus and protect service members. The Canadian government called on the military to help the country fight the pandemic by establishing Operation LASER, a domestic-focused mission to provide assistance to civil authorities.

¹Department of National Defence. 2017. Strong, Secure, Engaged. Canada’s Defence Policy, p. 14.

²Crown-Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs Canada. 2019. “Safety, security, and defence chapter.” Canada’s Arctic and Northern Policy Framework. <https://www.rcaanc-cirnac.gc.ca/eng/1562939617400/1562939658000>.

The Modern Threat Environment Poses New Challenges

The current threat environment is dynamic and rapidly evolving. To address it, the CAF should rely on pre-existing partnerships with trusted allies. NORAD has the structure to facilitate this cooperation, but it needs to be updated to confront modern threats.

DND's efforts to modernize continental defence have mainly focused on updating NWS. While this focus on the foundation of North American defence is essential, it does not accurately reflect the changing nature of the wider threat landscape. As the Chief of the Defence Staff General Jonathan Vance expressed in March 2020, Russia and China's antagonistic actions are a great cause for concern. Their growing presence in the Arctic poses a threat to Canada's aerial, maritime, and territorial sovereignty. The current continental defence framework was inherited from the Cold War and needs an update to address current and future threat areas.

The Way Forward: Opportunities to Modernize and Adapt

Faced with these challenges to continental defence, DND should conduct a review of its current NORAD commitments and expand them along three lines of modernization:

1. **Focus on Cyber Capacity-Building Programs:** NORAD modernization should go beyond reinforcing Cold War era doctrine and should include programs that reflect the dynamic nature of modern conflicts. Up until now, this 'modernization' has included renewing the NWS and procuring mission-ready fighter aircrafts to enhance aerospace capacity and control. Cyber threats are a part of every domain and modernization projects need to reflect this reality. Thus, NORAD modernization must include expanding cyber operational capacity and developing cyber-specific joint operations that reflect Canada's approach to adapting to emerging threats, while continuing to foster cooperation with the US.
2. **Rethink CAF roles and responsibilities:** The new focus of the CAF within the context of COVID-19 provides the personnel and operational focus needed to direct attention to North American defence. Allocating more resources and personnel to continental defence missions will help protect the health and safety of CAF members. Canada should prioritize operations in North America, with a focus on NORAD and deployments in the Arctic.
3. **Embrace the partnership with the United States to tackle Arctic security:** The binational defence partnership already provides the structure, interoperability, and mutually beneficial commitments advantageous for Canada. The current US administration's 'America First' policy provides an opportunity for greater Canadian leadership in continental defence. By enhancing cooperation, Canada can achieve its defence priorities and promote its national interests. DND should advocate for an increased emphasis on Arctic presence and monitoring as a mutually beneficial operation to promote sovereignty in an increasingly contested space.