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U.S. Ballistic Missile Defense, NORAD and the Canada Conundrum

Joel Sokolsky

When newly sworn in U.S. Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel announced in early 2013 that in response to the growing threat from North Korea, 14 new Ballistic Missile Defense (BMD) interceptors would be added to the 30 already in place in California and Alaska, the *Wall Street Journal* called it “one of the biggest switcheroos of the Obama Presidency.” Whether the administration is prepared to go much further still is not clear. A September 2012 report by the U.S. National Research Council (*Making Sense of Ballistic Missile Defense*) called for a gradual buildup of the system, specifically mentioning Fort Drum, NY and northern Maine as possible BMD locations.

While the deployment of more BMD interceptors will be a purely American decision, such an expansion will have implications for U.S. defense relations with Canada. This is because of the existence of the North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD), a unique “bi-national” command staffed with both American and Canadian military personnel which, since 1957, has had responsibility for the aerospace defense of both countries. Originally postured to defend the continent against the threat of Soviet long-range bombers by providing a single command for the operational control of assigned American and Canadian air defense forces, NORAD in subsequent years has taken on additional responsibility for warning of ballistic missile attack and space surveillance.

But NORAD never had a real operational BMD *function*. During the Cold War, the United States did not deploy it and there was no capability to intercept Soviet nuclear-armed ground and sea-launched Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles (ICBMs and SLBMs) before they reached their military and urban targets in the U.S. or Canada. The “defense” of North America lay instead in the deterrent power of the American strategic-nuclear offensive capability.



The absence of an American BMD system meant that Canada, although involved through NORAD in missile warning, could eschew a role in BMD, a situation that reflected Canadian policy preferences.

With the advent of new post-Cold War missile threats and the deployment by the United States of a limited BMD system directed against North Korea and other “rogue” states, the U.S. has now moved to deploy a limited BMD system of radars and interceptors. These capabilities were not placed under NORAD’s operational control, although as the command responsible for the continent’s aerospace defense this might have been seen as a logical step. Here again, the government in Ottawa has resisted direct participation in BMD, and adjustments were made at NORAD to accommodate Canadian reluctance. With Washington now set to expand its BMD system, including along the border with Canada, Ottawa’s position may no longer be tenable and as such the future of NORAD as a bi-national command is in question.

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Missile Defense and the Obligations of a “Good and Friendly Neighbour”

Speaking in Kingston, Ontario in 1938, President Franklin Roosevelt declared that the United States would not stand idly by if Canada were ever threatened. In response, then Prime Minister W. L. Mackenzie King said that Canada’s obligation as a “good and friendly neighbour” was to see to it that enemy forces did not attack the U.S. by land, sea or air by way of Canada. The essence of the bilateral security relationship—its close, friendly and cooperative nature notwithstanding—is that Canada cannot become a security liability for the U.S.

This obligation took on new meaning after World War Two as the Soviet Union developed atomic weapons and a long-range bomber force capable of flying over the North Pole en route to the U.S. Suddenly, Canada became, in the words of American Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, a “very important piece of real estate.” Canada understood and readily embraced its new position. As the Cold War deepened in the late 1940s and early 1950s, Ottawa joined with Washington to create a strong western deterrent in Europe through the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and in North America in the development of radar lines in the Canadian north backed by interceptor aircraft to provide for continental air defence. In 1957, these combined efforts were brought together under a single operational command, NORAD, with an American general in charge who reported directly to each government, a Canadian deputy, and a combined bi-national headquarters at Colorado Springs.

No sooner had NORAD been established to defend against the bomber, then the “missile became the message” and Canada’s strategic importance, along with the Canadian and American

air defence systems declined. Our best bet was deterrence and deterrence depended on good warning. Ballistic missiles (whether ICBMs launched from the USSR or SLBMs fired from Soviet submarines) aimed at the U.S. would travel into then beyond the atmosphere and then sharply down toward their American targets, arcing above the altitude of Canadian air space. Unlike the extensive air defence installations that were once located in Canada, no system to detect or track ballistic missiles has ever been located there or operated by the Canadian military. The US placed its missile warning radars on its own soil in Alaska, in the United Kingdom, in Greenland, and in

Another factor that made this situation viable in NORAD was that during the Cold War the United States did not actively deploy a BMD system (except briefly in the 1970s, with a single BMD site). The prevailing view was that a BMD system could never be effective and that its very existence, especially if matched by a Soviet counterpart, would destabilize the nuclear balance of power which was based upon an Assured Destruction capability—that is, that neither superpower could gain from a first strike. As arms control advocates argued, the mere presence of a BMD capability might tempt one side to believe a first strike was possible. In the early 1970s, the U.S. and USSR



American and Canadian personnel monitor activity in the North American maritime and air domains in the NORAD and U.S. Northern Command command center, Peterson Air Force Base, CO (Credit: Sgt 1st Class Gail Braymen)

space. Despite this, Canadians remained involved in the NORAD missile warning role. It is a bit of a puzzle why this is the case; the quality of Canadian personnel at Colorado Springs and our historical defence partnership offer only a partial explanation. It just may be, as a senior Canadian defense official mused before a Canadian parliamentary committee in 2000, that Americans simply have developed a comfortable “habit” of working with Canadians in continental defense.

signed the Antiballistic Missile Defense Treaty limiting BMD systems. While the Soviets deployed two BMD sites, the U.S. eventually dismantled its only BMD site. Canada welcomed this U.S. position on BMD and indeed in the 1968 renewal of the NORAD agreement insisted that a clause be added which stated that participation in the bi-national command not obligate it to be involved in missile defence.



Flight test of a three-stage Ground-Based Interceptor from Vandenberg Air Force Base, CA, 26 January 2013 (Credit: Missile Defense Agency, U.S. Department of Defense).

In 1983, President Ronald Reagan launched his Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI), and Canada was again faced with having to make an uncomfortable decision about NORAD and missile defense. SDI envisioned, amongst other things, space-based BMD interceptors (hence the pejorative appellation “Star Wars”). When Canada was asked by the Reagan administration if it wanted to officially participate in SDI research, it declined, but there was no damage to NORAD or overall U.S.-Canada defense relations. Indeed, in 1985, the U.S. and Canada agreed to modernize NORAD’s air defence capabilities, in part to deal with a new air threat: cruise missiles. In the end, Reagan’s program ran into strong public and Congressional opposition and the BMD issue faded away again as the Cold War ended.

In the late 1990s, due to fears about North Korean and Iranian missile programs, the Clinton administration, this time pressed by Congress, moved to develop limited BMD capabilities to match the new limited threat. But the White House was not enthusiastic about forging ahead with an extensive and expensive “National Missile Defense” (NMD) system. Concern about the future of NORAD in

these years centered on the declining strategic relevance of traditional air defence, as the numbers of radar stations (only just recently modernized) and interceptor aircraft were cut back to bare minimums.

This was the situation on September 11, 2001 when, with the Canadian Deputy Commander in charge, the order went out: “Generate! generate! generate!” But NORAD was not postured to deal with threats coming from inside the continent. In the days that followed, fighter aircraft on alert were deployed to 26 sites in the contiguous U.S., with a goal of providing 20-minute coverage of potential targets, including major cities. Though this extensive

deployment was subsequently scaled back, NORAD has occasionally provided coverage for special events in both the U.S. and Canada, such as the 2010 Vancouver Olympic Games and the G8/G20 summits. In addition, with American homeland security and defence assuming greater importance, the United States established a new unified command to cover North America, U.S. Northern Command (USNORTHCOM), whose commander also serves as commander of NORAD. Canada was approached by the Pentagon about converting NORAD into something bigger, a comprehensive North American defense arrangement but declined, electing instead to establish its own homeland defense arrangements.

In the post-9/11 war on terrorism, the George W. Bush administration renewed efforts for an NMD system. It abrogated the U.S.-U.S.S.R. Antiballistic Missile Defense Treaty in late 2001 and deployed a limited missile defense of the United States. Again, Canada was approached to participate and in 2004 the government of Prime Minister Paul Martin agreed that NORAD could support the new missile defense system. But a year later when the Bush administration asked if Canada would directly participate in BMD operations, the Martin government declined, yielding to public sentiment which remained suspicious of BMD and highly critical of the policies

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of George W. Bush. Beyond allowing NORAD to provide warning information to the interceptor missiles, Canada, and thus NORAD remains uninvolved in BMD.

To be sure, Ottawa does not wish to be a security liability to the U.S. in the war on terrorism. That war is Canada's war too. In the wake of 9/11, not only did Canada immediately deploy forces to Afghanistan, where they remained for over a decade, the Canadian government undertook a wide range of efforts to strengthen its internal security and worked with the U.S. to secure the border between the two countries. As a July 2005 State Department *Background Note* on Canada observed: "While law enforcement cooperation and coordination were excellent prior to the terrorist attacks on the United States of September 11, they have since become even closer ... U.S.-Canada bilateral and multilateral cooperation in the fight is unequalled."

What's more, the United States has been prepared to accommodate continuing Canadian aversion to bilateral cooperation in BMD. The newly elected Conservative government of Prime Minister Stephen Harper was able to renew the NORAD agreement in 2006 including an expansion of the Command's mission to include maritime warning. Moreover, unlike all the previous renewals, this one has no expiry date.

In NORAD, then, Canada and the US appear to have established a firm, perennial institution with flexibility enough to accommodate asymmetries in command at Colorado Springs. While Canada does not participate in the *operation* of missile defences, Canadians in NORAD support the system by providing warning and assessment of any potential missile attack. This arrangement can lead to some oddities at Colorado Springs. For example, a Canadian general officer in command of NORAD would be able to confirm that North America is under missile attack and provide the warning, but must leave it to an American to release the BMD interceptors.

However, notwithstanding the 2006 renewal and accommodation, the Canadian decision to stay out of BMD still leaves NORAD's future as a bi-national command in jeopardy. This is because, as James Fergusson of the University of Manitoba points out in his 2010 book *Canada and Ballistic Missile Defence, 1954-2009*, "NORAD's early warning mission appear[s] at risk of becoming a redundancy." Known as Integrated Tactical Warning and Assessment or "ITT/WA," wherein air and missile warning and attack assessment functions are brought together, early warning is at the very heart of NORAD's mission. And very recently, the stakes have been raised. The Obama administration's policy reversal on

BMD and Secretary Hagel's announcement of an expansion of the system indicates a new seriousness about missile defense that highlights the differences between Washington and Ottawa on BMD. If the U.S. proceeds with a more extensive BMD system, the existing accommodations within NORAD to the continued Canadian aversion to BMD may not be possible nor in the United States' best interest. Americans may in other words get over their habit of cooperating with Canadians and decide to effectively gut NORAD by unilaterally taking ITT/WA away from the bi-national command.

Giving Up the Anti-BMD Habit

Today, the Harper government has given no indication that it is considering pulling its own about face on BMD. But as the Obama administration and its successor move forward in expanding America's ability to intercept missiles, Ottawa may have no choice if it wishes to maintain NORAD as a permanent and relevant substantive and symbolic fixture of American-Canadian security cooperation. The price of sustaining the United States habit of cooperating with Canada in matters of continental defense is that Canadians give up their habit of rejecting ballistic missile defense. Given the stakes involved, it seems a small price to pay.



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