

Long Past Time for Canada to Exit NORAD

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This weekend the North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD) celebrates its 60th anniversary. On May 12, 1958, Canada and the US officially signed their most significant bilateral military accord.

The Cold War agreement was supposed to defend the two countries from an invasion by Soviet bombers coming *from the north*. But, the Berlin Wall fell three decades ago and NORAD continues. In fact, the agreement was renewed [indefinitely](#) in 2006.

Initially NORAD focused on radar and fighter jets. As technologies advanced, the Command took up intercontinental ballistic missiles, cruise missiles and space-based satellites.

Thousands of Canadian military personnel support NORAD's operations. One hundred and fifty Canadians are stationed at NORAD's central collection and coordination facility near Colorado Springs, Colorado. Hundreds more work at regional NORAD outposts across the US and Canada and many pilots are devoted to the Command. A Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF) general is deputy commander of NORAD and its commander-in-chief is a US Air Force general.

In the lead-up to its establishment newly elected Prime Minister John Diefenbaker faced "heavy pressure from the military" to back the agreement. Then chairman of the chiefs of defence staff, Charles Foulkes, later admitted to a House of Commons defence committee that

"[we stampeded](#) the incoming Conservative government with the NORAD agreement."

Before NORAD's creation the RCAF had been expanding ties to the US command in Colorado Springs and misled the politicians about the scope of these efforts. In *Dilemmas in Defence Decision-Making: constructing Canada's role in NORAD, 1958 - 96* Ann Crosby points out that the RCAF pursued NORAD discussions secretly "[in order](#) to address the politically sensitive issues without the involvement of Canadian political representatives."

While the Canadian Forces frame the alliance as an exclusively military matter, NORAD's political implications are vast. The accord impinges on Canadian sovereignty, influences weapons procurement and ties Canada to US belligerence.

External Affairs officials immediately understood that NORAD would curtail sovereignty. An internal memo explained,

“the establishment of NORAD is a decision for which there is no precedent in Canadian history in that it grants in peace time to a foreign representative operational control of an element of Canadian Forces in Canada.”

Under the accord the Colorado-based commander of NORAD could deploy Canadian fighter jets based in this country without any express Canadian endorsement.

For over a decade the US commander of NORAD effectively controlled nuclear tipped Bomarc missiles based near North Bay, Ontario, and La Macaza, Québec. According to the agreement, the Canadian battle staff officer on duty in North Bay would receive authorization from the Colorado Springs commander, “[allow\[ing\]](#) for the release and firing of nuclear armed Bomarc missiles without specific Canadian government authorization.”

NORAD also deepened the US military footprint in Canada. As part of the accord, the US set up the Distant Early Warning (DEW) line across the Arctic in the late 1950s. NORAD also drove Ottawa to formally accept US Bomarc missiles in 1963. According to Crosby, the agreement that laid the basis for NORAD effectively - unbeknownst to Prime Minister Diefenbaker - committed Canada to acquiring US nuclear weapons for air defence.

NORAD has pushed the CF towards US arms systems. It’s also heightened pressure to add and upgrade radar, satellite, jets, vessels, etc. In the late 1950s the RCAF pushed for interceptor jets so Canada could be “a full partner in NORAD”. Air Marshal Hugh Campbell explained that

“[if Canada](#) was not providing any effective weapons in the air defence system... Canada could no longer be a full partner in NORAD.”

More recently, CBC reported that Canada may be “[compelled](#) to invest in technology that can shoot down cruise missiles as part of the upcoming overhaul of the North American Aerospace Defence Command.”

NORAD is presented as a defensive arrangement, but that can’t be taken seriously when its lead actor has [1,000](#) international bases and special forces deployed in [149 countries](#). Rather than protect Canada and the US, NORAD supports violent missions led by other US commands. In 1965 NORAD’s mandate was expanded to include surveillance and assessment sharing for US commands stationed worldwide (United States European Command, United States Pacific Command, United States Africa Command, etc.).

NORAD has drawn Canada into US belligerence. During the July 1958 US invasion of Lebanon NORAD was placed on “increased readiness” while US troops checked secular Arab nationalism after Iraqis toppled a Western-backed King (at the same time British troops invaded Jordan to prop up the monarchy there).

In a higher profile incident, Canadian NORAD personnel were put on high alert when the US illegally blockaded Cuba in October 1962. This transpired even though Prime Minister Diefenbaker hesitated in supporting US actions during the Cuban Missile Crisis.

During the 1973 Ramadan/Yom Kippur/Arab-Israeli War NORAD was placed on heightened alert. Washington wanted to deter the USSR from intervening on Egypt’s behalf.

NORAD systems offered [surveillance](#) and communications support to the 1991 war on Iraq. They also [supported](#) the 2003 invasion of Iraq. The same can be said for US bombing in Afghanistan, Libya, Somalia, etc.

Unfortunately, public opposition to NORAD has largely dried up. While anti-war activists won the NDP over to an 'out of NORAD' position in the 1960s, the party's current defence critic recently complained that the Trudeau government hasn't done more to strengthen the bilateral military accord. In November Randall Garrison criticized the Liberals for failing to follow its defence policy review's recommendation to upgrade a [multi-billion](#) dollar early-warning radar system used by NORAD. In a story headlined "[Conservatives, NDP call on Liberal government to match rhetoric with action on NORAD](#)" Garrison told the *Hill Times*, "so they put in that they are going to replace it, and that's certainly the biggest thing we need to do in terms of our cooperation with NORAD, [but] I don't see the follow through down the road on it, in terms of planning, implementation, or budgeting."

As NORAD turns 60, it's time to rekindle opposition to this odious accord.

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