

NORAD-Russian Joint Air Drill, Bomber Incursions and Canada's F-35 Jet Purchase

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The North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD) and the Russian Federation Air Force conducted a cooperative air defense exercise from August 8-11 that focused on combating terrorism.

[Vigilant Eagle](#) was hailed as a milestone exercise between the Cold War era rivals. It included Russian, U.S., along with Canadian Air Force personnel operating from command centers inside Russia and the United States directing fighter jets, as well as civilian air traffic controllers. It took several years to stage the drill which centered around, "an international air terrorism scenario exercised over the Pacific Ocean consisting of forces from the U.S. and Russia responding to the simulated hijacking of a B-757 en route to the Far East." The joint exercise was, "designed to establish clear communication processes that would allow the two forces to work together during a real crisis." Russian Air Force Col. Alexander Vasilyev emphasized the importance of cooperation in combating the dangers of air terrorism. He stated, "Terrorism is something that affects all our countries. So it is very important that we work together to develop procedures and bring the relationship between our countries closer together to unite our countries in the fight against terrorism."

In April, it was [announced](#) that, "NATO and Russia have begun a testing phase of a joint system for air traffic coordination. This will be the first NATO-Russia system of this kind to be fielded. The system focuses primarily on the fight against terrorism and will provide a shared radar picture of air traffic and early notification of suspicious air activities." The report entitled the [Moscow Metro Bombings and Terrorism in Russia](#) also addresses the possibility of developing further practical NATO-Russia cooperation in regards to terrorism. President Barack Obama has called for Russia and the U.S. to further deepen collaboration on security and anti-terrorism matters. In May, the Associated Press [reported](#) that, "Obama told a Russian television station that no single country can defeat terrorists who have attacked targets throughout the world. He said he looks forward to 'increasing cooperation between the United States and Russia' on fighting terrorism." Despite any past or present tension between the two countries, the seemingly endless shadowy war on terrorism has provided a common enemy and demonstrated how the global conflict can at times make strange bedfellows.

The recent NORAD-Russian air drill was preceded by an incident where Canadian fighter jets [repelled](#) two long-range Russian bombers off the coast of Labrador near the Arctic. Russia contends the flight was simply a training mission and [deny](#) trying to enter Canadian airspace. They maintain that the Canadian military was aware of the exercise contrary to Defence minister Peter MacKay who insists that they were not notified. NORAD fighters have

intercepted between 12 and 18 bombers annually since 2007. In advance of President Obama's visit to Canada back in February of 2009, Canadian fighter jets were [scrambled](#) to head off Russian bombers approaching its airspace. Prime Minister Stephen Harper promised that Canada would defend its airspace and sovereignty by responding every time the Russians make any kind of intrusion into its Arctic territory. At times, Canada and Russia have both been guilty of a war of words in regards to Arctic sovereignty. The latest so-called Russian bomber incursion appears to be nothing more than an attempt by the Conservative government to capitalize on the event to further its political interests.

The Harper government is using the most recent confrontation between Canadian and Russian military planes to justify its plans to buy 65 new jet fighters and draw attention to its stance on Arctic sovereignty. In July, the Canadian government [announced](#) plans to acquire the Lockheed Martin F-35 Lightning II which will replace its fleet of CF-18 Hornets. The first F-35's are expected to be delivered by 2016. Including maintenance of the fighter jets, the total price tag is expected to cost Canadian taxpayers over \$16 billion. The government insists they are getting the best aircraft for the best value. Some have questioned the purchase considering Canada is running its largest deficit in history. The Liberal party has been critical of the deal and its lack of transparency. Not to mention that one of Canada's biggest military acquisitions was done without a single competing bid. The Conservatives argue that they exercised options and that the F-35 was the only next-generation fighter plane that meets the operational requirements of the Canadian Forces. They continue to defend their decision making a case that the new jets are part of its obligation to its allies and will protect Canada's sovereignty well into the future.

Controversy has surrounded Canadian Defence Department computers being used to alter online Wikipedia entries. This includes the removal of some information which was critical of the Harper government's decision to spend billions on the new F-35 stealth jet. The New Democrats are [demanding](#) answers. NDP MP Claude Gravelle stated, "At worst this type of manipulative behaviour is indicative of the government's culture of information control." He went on to say, "Even if this apparent misuse of resources is the work of a lone DND staffer 'freelancing,' it raises questions about oversight in that department." Defence Department computers were also used to insert insults on Wikipedia aimed at the Liberals who have questioned the jet aircraft purchase. Gravelle also added, "Some of the comments posted regarding Liberal Leader Michael Ignatieff and the media were particularly worrisome. We do not expect to see this type of big brother behaviour in Canada. Unfortunately Canadians are starting to see a pattern in the desire to control the message." This illustrates how web based institutions such as Wikipedia can act as gatekeepers and be used to spread propaganda in an effort to guide public perception.

It is expected that the Commons Standing Committee on Defence will hold hearings near the end of August on the Conservative's proposed purchase of the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter. The Liberals remain critical of the plan and have said that if they form the next government, they would put the contract on hold until further review. In the end, they would approve it. The truth is that on most major issues there is hardly a difference between the Liberals and Conservatives and they differ on rhetoric alone. Even the Globe and Mail had a recent headline [Tories and Grits are as one on defence policy](#). Both parties have advanced North American integration through NAFTA, the Security and Prosperity Partnership and other initiatives. They have also supported Canada's mission in Afghanistan which is slated to end in 2011, but could be extended. In the coming years, Canada could be asked to play a bigger role in the war on terrorism, including participation in future American and NATO

military operations. Many would like to see a return to its more traditional role as a peacekeeping nation, one which has garnered praise from the rest of the world.

Whether or not the majority of Canadians support the government's decision to purchase the new F-35 jets, it does represent a continued commitment to NATO and NORAD. It is also closely tied to deeper U.S.-Canada military integration and a North American security perimeter.

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