



SAVING NORAD: **SHOULD OTTAWA SEIZE THE OBAMA MOMENT?**

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SUMMARY

The North American Aerospace Defence Command (NORAD) is heading for obsolescence. Saving it would require reversing the Martin government's 2005 "no" on missile defence. The Obama presidency provides the Harper government with some political cover to do so. Ottawa could also seize the opportunity to reconsider the Chrétien government's 2002 decision not to consider broadly expanding NORAD's roles.

While it will be tempting to try to save NORAD for symbolic reasons, it should be let go. The U.S. and Canada no longer need a binational aerospace command. The focus should be on air defence cooperation, especially for special events such as the 2010 Vancouver Olympics.

INTRODUCTION: NORAD's long and continuing demise

The arrival of Barack Obama in the White House may give Canada and the United States a chance to save the North American Aerospace Defence Command (NORAD) from what otherwise will be its ongoing decline into marginality. With George W. Bush gone, there is some political cover for the Harper government to try to reverse the Martin government's 2005 decision not to participate directly in North American missile defence. The timing may even be right to revisit the Chrétien government's 2002 decision not to enter discussions with the United States over broadening NORAD's mandate beyond aerospace defence and turning it into a binational homeland defence command. Reversal of Canada's missile defence stance is essential to saving NORAD as an aerospace defence command, and with it, Canada's significant involvement beyond air defence. Should Ottawa seize this Obama moment?

It may seem odd to be talking about NORAD's demise. After all, the highest-ranking official on duty at NORAD at the time of the Sept. 11, 2001 terrorist attacks was a Canadian: Maj.-Gen. Rick Findley, NORAD's deputy commander. What more evidence of deep and enduring partnership could be needed? As if to underline this, the most recent renewal of the NORAD agreement by Ottawa and Washington, in 2006, had no expiration date. Officials in both capitals said the pact was renewed "in perpetuity," unlike the recent extensions of no longer than five years. It looked like NORAD was here to stay.

But Canadians at the command's headquarters on Peterson Air Force Base in Colorado Springs, Colo., as well as officials at National Defence and Foreign Affairs in Ottawa know that NORAD is in trouble and Canada's future role is in doubt. The scope of the command's responsibilities has been shrinking for years, while Canada's geographic importance to aerospace defence of the United States has declined. These are long-term trends.

NORAD was created in 1957 for one military purpose. Its U.S. commander-in-chief, his Canadian deputy and their binational staff would stand ready to conduct a vast air defence battle against attacking Soviet nuclear bombers. Any fight would extend across much of North America, especially the prime zone of potential engagement: southern Canada. NORAD would be able to call upon a tremendous array of air defences, led by close to 70 fighter squadrons from the U.S. Air Force, nine Royal Canadian Air Force fighter squadrons, plus short- and longer-range surface-to-air missiles. Most of the fighter aircraft, as well as the missiles, were to be equipped with nuclear air defence weapons.

The air defenders at NORAD's creation believed the threat to North America would soon shift from Soviet bombers to intercontinental and submarine-launched ballistic missiles. They firmly expected that in the not so distant future, robust North American missile defences would be deployed and those would be placed under NORAD's operational control, to complement the air defences. NORAD's task would become mightier still.

Neither of those developments ever happened. Robust missile defences were never deployed. The technology of shooting down an incoming ballistic missile turned out to be more difficult and expensive than expected in the 1950s. Moreover, mainstream Cold War strategic thinking in the West turned against active missile defences in the 1960s. Missile defence was seen as destabilizing in two ways: it could heighten the arms race between the United States and the Soviet Union and it could encourage reckless first use of nuclear weapons in a crisis. This thinking led to the 1972 U.S.-U.S.S.R. ABM Treaty that largely, although not completely, banned the deployment of missile defence. Both the U.S. and the U.S.S.R. were permitted to keep a couple of missile defence sites and both took advantage of the opportunity.

The United States set up a “Safeguard” missile defence at just one site in North Dakota, intended to defend nearby intercontinental ballistic missiles. Safeguard was deactivated in 1976, shortly after being put into operation. Thereafter, the United States had no active missile defence. This situation is said to have stunned former California governor Ronald Reagan when he visited NORAD’s Cheyenne Mountain operations centre shortly after Safeguard was dismantled. When he became president, Reagan envisaged a massive, perhaps even leak-proof, ballistic missile defence. In 1984, Reagan launched the Strategic Defense Initiative, a research program into advanced technology. Yet Reagan’s initiative never led to vast missile defence. In fact, there were still no missile defences in 2001 when President George W. Bush withdrew the United States from the ABM Treaty and instructed the Defense Department in 2002 to field a rudimentary, limited missile defence. That system remains in place today. It consists of about 20 ground-based interceptors divided between Fort Greeley, Alaska, and Vandenberg Air Force Base in California.

While U.S. planning often included the possibility of putting parts of its missile defence on Canadian soil, decisions by the Pearson government in 1968 and the Martin government in 2005 to keep interceptors away from Canada by no means perplexed the U.S. military. Canadian locations simply were not necessary as interceptor sites; North Dakota, California and Alaska would do. In other words, Canada is far less important to the United States for missile defence than it once was for air defence. The trend was already visible when it came to the detection of threats to North American security. Key radar networks for air defence, namely the Distant Early Warning Line (and its successor, the North Warning System) and the Permanent/Pinetree system had to be located largely on Canadian soil. Yet no system to detect or track ballistic missiles has ever been located in Canada. They have been built in Alaska, Greenland and the United Kingdom, as well as in the lower 48 states. Systems have also been placed in space.

Although no system to detect, track or destroy ballistic missiles has ever been located in Canada or operated by the Canadian military, NORAD officials, including the Americans, have generally been keen on giving NORAD operational control of U.S. missile defences. Canadians on duty at NORAD could operationally control U.S. air defences and order the use of nuclear air defence weapons in U.S. airspace. The U.S. would have trusted no other ally with such responsibilities. Why not let Canadians control the missile defences, too, while on duty in Cheyenne Mountain?

Such enthusiasm for involving Canadians and making missile defence a NORAD mission has not always been shared elsewhere in the U.S. Defense establishment. The Clinton government's 2005 rejection of missile defence put an end for now to the possibility. As a result, NORAD has operationally controlled neither the briefly deployed Safeguard system nor the simple missile defence that is in place today.

In other words, missile defence has never been a NORAD mission. Yet this has not posed any substantial command and control problems for the United States. NORAD has always been "twinned" with an all-U.S. command that shares its headquarters and its commander. The twin, currently U.S. Northern Command, has operational command of missile defences. This does call into question Canada's role in Colorado Springs.

While missile defence has never been a NORAD mission, the command still retains its original mission of air defence. North American air defences have been reduced to a shadow of what they were during the Cold War. The drop began with the long decline of the Soviet bomber threat and continued with the breakup of the Soviet Union. All the nuclear air defence weapons and all the fixed surface-to-air defence weapons are gone. Most of the radar sites have been closed. Only a handful of fighter interceptors remain of the many U.S. and Canadian squadrons once available. NORAD's founding *raison d'être*, standing by to fight a vast air defence battle, is also gone. Long gone.

An official of Canada's Department of External Affairs, seeking to correct the understanding of NORAD's capabilities among his colleagues, noted in a 1990 memorandum that "NORAD does not provide a means of knowing what is going on *in* our airspace, but rather what may be *entering* our airspace." The world learned this on Sept. 11, 2001 when the air defences under NORAD's operational control were unable to detect and respond in time to aircraft that had been hijacked within North American airspace. Since then, the air defences of Canada and the United States have been reconfigured to better handle an internal threat. The changes have enhanced regionalized capabilities, allowing better protection for Washington and New York City, and temporary protection for special events. Canada first encountered this in 2002 with the G8 summit in Kananaskis, Alta., an isolated mountain village. Canadian and U.S. air defenders are now engaged in planning for the Vancouver Olympics in 2010.

Responding to non-military air threats, including terrorist threats, is a matter over which both the United States and Canada want to preserve and exercise sovereignty. This can most readily be seen in the arrangements each country has drafted for the ultimate decision in the event of a terrorist hijacking or similar event: whether to destroy the plane. In Canada, the government has reserved such a decision for itself. No details have been released, but one expects the prime minister or another senior minister would make that judgment. In the United States, if the president or secretary of defense cannot be reached, senior military authorities have permission to destroy threatening civilian aircraft. While details of the American plan are also confidential, it is clear that this means senior U.S. military authorities. The deputy commander of NORAD and other senior Canadian officers cannot order the destruction of civilian aircraft in U.S. airspace. NORAD structures and operating procedures have always been flexible enough to accommodate such differences in national delegated authority, while preserving the ability to conduct transborder operations.

Being prepared to respond to a terrorist air threat obviously requires close working relationships with civil aviation authorities. It also entails working with federal officials, as well as state/provincial law enforcement agencies and other civilian entities. This is particularly the case with special events, such as the Vancouver Olympics, where the Royal Canadian Mounted Police is the lead law enforcement agency and several others are involved. Here, NORAD's regionalized air defence structure may provide it with an advantage. A good deal of planning and operational authority for air defence rests with NORAD's three regions, including the Canadian region, which is headquartered in Winnipeg, Man.

Yet the organizational picture has become quite muddled in recent years, with significant implications for the future of homeland air defence co-operation. This has been evident in the planning for the 2010 Olympics. Both the United States and Canada have created homeland defence commands within their militaries. In the United States, this is Northern Command, NORAD's current twin. While planning the creation of Northern Command, the Pentagon sent word to Ottawa that it was open to transforming NORAD into a binational homeland defence command with responsibilities beyond aerospace defence. The Colorado Springs "twins" would have roughly parallel areas of responsibility. The ever-cautious Chrétien government let the opportunity go by and the Pentagon established Northern Command.

The Canadian Forces followed in 2005 with the creation of Canada Command. While wags immediately started to call it "true NORTHCOM," it seems to have been only in small part, if at all, a reaction to the establishment of a U.S. homeland defence command. In fact, it was part of an overall restructuring of the Canadian military undertaken by the energetic chief of defence staff, Gen. Rick Hillier that he called the "transformation" of the Canadian armed forces. In addition to Canada Command, Hillier created another command to take charge of Canadian operations overseas.

North American air defence fits somewhat awkwardly into the command structures. Canada Command is responsible for and takes command of just about all active military operations within Canada, *except* air defence, which remains a NORAD responsibility. On paper, it appears that in planning for the Vancouver Olympics, the Canadian air force will be responding to two commanders: one in Colorado Springs and one at the Canada Command headquarters in Ottawa. While overall responsibility for air defence rests with NORAD, who provides final advice for the responsible Canadian minister in the event of a terrorist air incident? Will the head of Canada Command, the senior general officer in charge of military operations in Canada, have any role at all?

The situation is somewhat different in the United States, where twinning has created significant command overlap in both authority and personnel. Both NORAD and U.S. Northern Command have air defence responsibilities. NORAD has primacy when it comes to air defence, but U.S. Northern Command can act as well where needed. This appears fairly easy to do, inasmuch as U.S. officers at NORAD in Colorado Springs can don U.S. Northern Command hats and act under that command's authority. Some U.S. Northern Command officials expressed unhappiness that first-responder status for domestic air defence, a sensitive aspect of homeland

security since the 9/11 attacks, belongs to the binational NORAD. Some Canadian officers have speculated that if another 9/11-type attack were to occur in the United States, there would not be another Canadian general in such a visible role. U.S. officers might be quick to don Northern Command hats and conduct the military response as an all-U.S. sovereignty operation.

More broadly, with two national homeland defence commands, is the binational NORAD even needed? Or does it get in the way? That will be addressed below.

In addition to operationally controlling the continent's air defences, (but never its missile defences) NORAD has always had a second responsibility: providing immediate (i.e. tactical) warning and assessment of an aerospace attack on the continent. The Integrated Tactical Warning and Attack Assessment (ITWAA) became NORAD's top responsibility once the continent's massive air defences were dismantled. If the binational command were to be given a name based on its functions in recent years, it would be called the "North American ITWAA and Air Defence Command." Today, Canadian involvement in the Integrated Tactical Warning and Attack Assessment is in jeopardy because of the Martin government's 2005 decision on missile defence.

It is surprising that Canadians have been involved in tactical warning and assessment for several decades, given how little they contribute. To be sure, providing warning and assessment is in part dependent on information from the air defence operations of the Canadian NORAD region. But that is all Canada contributes to the data gathering upon which NORAD is dependent to warn and assess. As mentioned above, no system to detect or track ballistic missiles has ever been located in Canada or operated by the Canadian Forces. The Canadian military once operated special ground-based cameras to monitor objects in orbit, thereby contributing to NORAD's space-tracking role. Those cameras are long gone.

Yet Canadian officers remain involved in the warning and assessment process that is at the very heart of NORAD. Within NORAD's operations centre, a binational team under the direction of a Canadian or American command director is ready to advise the NORAD commander, general or flag officer in command who may also be Canadian, to declare North America under aerospace attack. NORAD's warning and assessment of the attack would then be provided to military and civilian organizations in the U.S. and Canada.

In recent years, NORAD has also provided warning and assessment in support of the new U.S. missile defence system. This was specifically provided for in an August 2004 amendment to the NORAD accord and approved by the Martin government. The revision prompted Frank McKenna, then Canada's ambassador to Washington, to exclaim — accurately — that Canada was "already part" of missile defence. Just days after McKenna's comments, the Martin government declared Canada would not be a direct participant in the operation of U.S. missile defence.

The two Canadian positions (part of missile defence, but not directly part) have created an odd set of operating procedures at NORAD and U.S. Northern Command to accommodate Canada's limitations on participation. If there is an attack on North America, and the command director is American, he or she can advise the commander that NORAD be declared under attack and that the missile defence be released. If a Canadian is on duty as command director, the process is splintered. The Canadian director can advise that North America be declared under attack, but must defer to a U.S. deputy command director to make the recommendation on interception. Higher up, the process could also be splintered. If a Canadian were in command of NORAD, he or she could confirm the recommendation that NORAD declare the continent under attack. But only an American general or admiral on duty could order, on behalf of U.S. Northern Command, that the missile defence be used. These roles are off-limits to Canadians as things now stand because of Paul Martin's "no."

No one at NORAD or U.S. Northern Command says these procedures would not work. Yet this odd arrangement cannot be counted to last very long. The U.S. will gradually bring online new missile detection and tracking systems directly linked to missile defence, not the tactical warning assessment. That is NORAD's primary responsibility. At some point in the not so distant future, keeping this a NORAD role will be open to question.

In summary, Canadian territory and airspace are less important to the aerospace defence of the United States than they were decades ago. NORAD's future is very much in question, largely because its function is becoming harder and harder to justify. Its original Cold War air defence mission against bombers is gone. Its current homeland air defence role in the age of terror is much more limited in scope and raises new issues of national sovereignty on both sides of the border. It also fits awkwardly into new U.S. and Canadian control and command structures. NORAD never acquired the missile defence role its U.S. and Royal Canadian Air Force founders envisaged. Today, that absence of responsibility for missile defence threatens the command's core responsibility for tactical warning and assessment. It will need saving if Canada wants to keep it.

How to save NORAD

Saving NORAD as an aerospace defence command requires saving its integrated warning and assessment duties. And that would require Canada accepting a greater role in missile defence. The 2005 decision to stay out of missile defence was announced during a periodic bout of Canadian anti-Americanism, which Prime Minister Paul Martin sought to exploit by playing the anti-American card in the lead up to a 2006 federal election. It was argued that the U.S. missile system was the prelude to space-based defences, a Canadian no-no. However, saying “no” to missile defence was also an easy way for Martin’s Liberals to renounce George W. Bush and all his works before the voters, especially those in Quebec. It would not be unfair or incorrect to call it George W. Bush’s missile defence. After all, it was President Bush who cut the Gordian knot on the ABM Treaty and ordered missile defence deployed.

Bush has gone back to Texas and the recent round of Canadian anti-Americanism seemed to be abating even before he left. His successor began his term as the most popular U.S. president in Canada since John F. Kennedy, to whom he has in myriad other ways been compared (almost always inaccurately). Yet Barack H. Obama is not going to be switching the missile defence system off and ordering the interceptors taken out of California and Alaska. It is not clear how much the Obama administration will be spending on research and development for future defence systems, or how fast it will proceed with the deployment of missile defences in Europe. Signals have been mixed. The Polish prime minister was confused about U.S. intentions after a phone conversation with President Obama. Vice-President Joe Biden said during a February speech in Munich that the new administration would like to work with the Russians in developing European missile defences. Good luck with that. Later in Prague, the president gave a speech in which he seemed to be committing the U.S. to deployment.

Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, in his recent budget statement, said research and development of missile defence would slow down in the Obama administration and that no new interceptors were being deployed to the Alaska site. But the current, rudimentary defence for North America is here to stay. It is much harder for opponents of direct Canadian participation to make the argument that under an Obama administration, the current system is a Trojan horse for space-based defences. Barack H. Obama and the Democrats would never do that!

This opens the door for Prime Minister Stephen Harper’s minority government to see if it can reach an agreement with Washington for Canadian participation in missile defence, or, pace Franck McKenna, greater Canadian participation seeing it already is part of missile defence. Obviously, this would have been easier for Harper’s Conservatives had they won a majority in the 2006 or 2008 elections.

What would greater Canadian participation entail? The most basic element would be Canadian involvement in command and control of the system within the NORAD and U.S. Northern Command operations centre. A Canadian command director would, just like an American counterpart, be able to advise the commander to declare North America under attack and to release the missile defence.

The United States and Canada could go further. NORAD's original concept for missile defence included the possibility of a Canadian general or admiral in command to exercise launch authority. This plan was never submitted to either government. Yet it seems unlikely that the U.S. would want to give such authority to a Canadian officer as long as Canada was not contributing anything to the system itself.

Even if Ottawa does not expect or want launch authority, it would have to bring something to the table beyond personnel in Colorado Springs. The most visible Canadian contribution conceivable, namely interceptors located on Canadian soil, can almost certainly be ruled out for several years. For a Harper government seeking gingerly to step in, such a move would be far too big a step, precisely because it is visible. The U.S. might not be interested in expanding the number of interceptor bases at this point, either. That leaves the possibility of a simple Canadian cash contribution. Or the U.S. might be persuaded to recognize some other aspect of the Canadian defence effort as an "asymmetrical contribution" to the missile defences. At one point, there was a plan to rely on the Canadian Forces "Sapphire" space-surveillance satellite scheduled for launch in 2011. "Sapphire," which has been delayed several years, is to track objects in higher earth orbit, reviving a Canadian military space specialty and once again making a Canadian contribution to NORAD's space-tracking responsibilities. There was a good deal of logic to the notion that "Sapphire" could serve as the basis of the "asymmetrical contribution" and it might be revived. Finally, there has been speculation that while U.S. missile defence is not dependent upon Canadian territory, it nonetheless might be enhanced significantly if an X-band tracking radar were to be located in Newfoundland or Labrador.

It should be added that greater participation in the missile defence would bring Canada an additional benefit. It would allow the Canadian government to negotiate the extent to which the missile defence could protect Canada. Many Canadians seem to think such protection is already in place, simply because the United States would not have a choice in the matter. This line of thinking, which is based on the old model of air defence, expects the Americans would have to shoot down all incoming missiles. But that is not so. Tracking systems are able to determine the point of impact, meaning the missile defenders would know if the target was Vancouver or Los Angeles. Since chances of intercepting any incoming missile are greater the more shots the defenders take, the U.S. decision makers would have a very strong incentive to take more shots at any missiles heading for the American soil and ignore missiles heading for Canada. The extent to which Canadian cities would be targeted for missile attack in an international crisis is an open question, or at least a question to be left open here.

If NORAD can be preserved as an aerospace defence command through more direct Canadian participation in missile defense, the Harper government might want to go further. This could mean discussions about broadening NORAD's responsibilities, turning it in effect into a "North American Defence Command," as it has sometimes been called. In effect, this would pick up where Canada and the United States were when the Pentagon informally asked Canada to join in reconfiguring NORAD. A revamped NORAD might have several responsibilities. In addition to the current aerospace warning role, NORAD could be given a mandate for "all domain" warning of terrorist and other lower-level threats to Canada and the United States.

The two countries have already taken a step in this direction. The 2006 NORAD renewal added “maritime warning for North America” to the NORAD missions, the first time duties were extended beyond the aerospace realm. This is an explicitly limited task, not extending to surveillance or the control of any Canadian or U.S. maritime forces. To provide maritime warning, a new cell has been created at NORAD that gathers existing information from where it can in both countries, especially from intelligence and naval establishments. The unit sifts and compares information concerning maritime threats to the continent. The new NORAD could also be given the task of planning for Canada-U.S. military co-operation in the event of contingencies such as natural disasters.

Finally, provisions might be put into the NORAD agreement to permit its commander to take operational control of any forces allocated by the U.S. or Canada in an emergency for any combined operations in North America authorized by the two governments. This would be quite distinct from the standing operational control that the NORAD commander has over U.S. and Canadian continental air defence forces. This possibility has popped up in official thinking; it was briefly alluded to as one option in the 2006 report of the Canada-U.S. Binational Planning Group. It may well be a suggestion to shy away from because of the general hysteria it could create in Canada over loss of sovereignty. It also is not necessary. But then again, NORAD itself is no longer necessary.

Symbol and functional reality

Some officials at the Departments of Foreign Affairs and National Defence will tell the Harper government that NORAD is symbolically important and would be very hard to re-create if let go. They will also say it is a vital conduit to U.S. planning and information.

It would be hard to deny that NORAD is the most important symbol of Canada-U.S. defence co-operation. NORAD’s symbolic power comes in large part from its vague extensiveness. Strictly speaking, it is an operational headquarters or an operational headquarters and a binational agreement. In more than 50 years of existence, NORAD has come to stand for Canada-U.S. aerospace defence co-operation, or more broadly, Canada-U.S. defence co-operation on par with Canada’s NATO involvement. Canadian politicians toss around the term “NORAD commitments” and while few people know what those commitments entail, everyone assumes that breaking them would make the Americans mad.

Like potential Canadian contributions to missile defence, and so very many other things Canadian-American, the symbolic NORAD is asymmetrical. Its power is far greater in Canada than in the U.S. Few if any Americans obsess over any NORAD commitments to Canada. And except on the occasion of visits to Washington by senior Canadian officials when the American speechwriters remember to put it in their bosses’ reciprocating remarks, Canada gets little to no credit for being in NORAD. Hardly anyone notices.

The days are long gone since Canadians thought that being in NORAD might give them special influence over U.S. foreign policy. Joel Sokolsky and Dan Middlemiss hit the nail on the head when they wrote several years ago that being in NORAD gave Canada a place at the console, not a seat at the table.

To be sure, Ottawa might be able to exploit the symbolic power of an enhanced NORAD, should it ever want to make a push for much closer co-operation, as some Canadians have suggested in recent years. At that point, the Americans might pay attention to such a symbol. The enhanced NORAD could be part of a package that would also include “Schengenization” of the border and a harmonized immigration and customs policy. However, the “one big idea” approach to Canada-U.S. relations, as it has sometimes been called, is today a complete non-starter on both sides of the border.

If Canada were ever to propose terminating NORAD, that might draw significant attention in the U.S. It may then be seen as a symbol that Canada was turning its back on co-operation with the United States. But nobody is suggesting Canada get out unilaterally. Even in the now likely event that NORAD ceases to be an aerospace defence command with responsibilities for both integrated warning and assessment and operational control over continental air defences, an entity called NORAD will probably remain. Even if not functionally useful, it could be allowed to linger on like that earlier symbol of Canada-U.S. defence relations that has lost almost all of its utility, the Permanent Joint Board on Defense.

It is also true that NORAD was created within a particular set of historical circumstances. Extensive use of Canadian airspace and territory were vital to defence of the United States. Both Canada and the U.S. had vast air defences that were best utilized under a single commander-in-chief. The U.S. had deep faith in its northern neighbor as a strategic partner, to the extent that President Dwight Eisenhower was prepared to simply give nuclear weapons to Canada for air defence without any further U.S. controls. All those conditions are long gone, so it probably would be difficult to re-create NORAD if it were not to continue. But who can say that if a NORAD were truly needed again because of changed strategic circumstances that our two countries would not be able to recreate it then?

It is foolish to deny that being in NORAD has been helpful to Canada in learning what the U.S. is up to in aerospace defence and more recently, homeland security. Proximity and informal ties cannot hurt. But it is far from a vital conduit. Ultimately, the United States lets Canada know about some of its planning because it is in the interest of the U.S. to do so. This would occur even without a binational command. Canadian air force officers who have served in Colorado Springs have been the most insistent voices on the point that being in NORAD is important for northward information flows. But they have usually been vague about which information and have never identified what data vital to Canada could only be obtained through the joint command.

Even those Canadian officers would have to concede that being in NORAD is no access guarantee for Canada. They know better than anyone how the United States has kept Canadians in Colorado Springs in the dark on certain issues. That has always been one of the roles of the all-U.S. “twin command” and of the U.S. Element in NORAD.

The most important information Canada and the United States count on getting from NORAD is the integrated warning and assessment of aerospace attack. Once Canada's role in it goes, only Americans will be providing the integrated warning and assessment, should an attack ever occur. But what is so bad about that from the Canadian perspective? What possible incentive would the U.S. have for not warning Canadian military and civilian entities and providing them further information about the nature of the attack?

NORAD may be getting in the way of what could be a more useful conduit, not only for information sharing, but for developing combined plans and operational understandings. That would be a channel running directly between the two national homeland defence commands. The officials at the Department of National Defence who created Canada Command certainly saw it as the logical interlocutor of U.S. Northern Command. Allowing this tie to develop makes as much sense as trying to supplant it with an enhanced NORAD, the "North American Defence Command." Still another option suggested by the Binational Planning Group was to replace the current binational command with a task force that reported to the two national homeland defence commands. One of the attractive aspects of this option is that it could be used to meet symbolic needs. Although the Binational Planning Group did not say so, the task force could be called "NORAD."

The minimalist option: an air defence command if necessary

That Canada and the United States no longer will be able to maintain a binational aerospace defence command and are unlikely to agree to establish a broader North American Defence Command still does not have to mean that no binational command at all is useful. There remains the need to provide for effective air defence co-operation. While there are no longer hundreds of bombers threatening the continent, and while commander NORAD would not fight a vast air defence battle, the simple fact is unchanged that aircraft can move swiftly across the Canada-U.S. border, requiring the ability to react swiftly and co-operatively by military and civilian authorities in both countries in the event of a terrorist hijacking or similar threat in the air. A binational air defence command may thus well be worth retaining. It might even revert to the original NORAD name, the North American Air Defence Command.

On the other hand, reverting to a pre-1957 situation may become more desirable if sovereignty concerns in both countries, changes in the command structure and the need to work closely with law enforcement officials are considered key. After all, there was plenty of Canada-U.S. air defence co-operation in the early 1950s even without a joint command. This included joint planning and sharing of information about aircraft location. It also allowed for fighter interceptors of one country to fly into the airspace of the other and if need be, destroy hostile aircraft there.

After the 2010 Vancouver Olympics, Ottawa and Washington will be in a better position to make decisions about the future of their air defence co-operation, especially the command structure. The 2006 NORAD agreement provides for a review of the accord to be completed in 2010. It makes sense to postpone that review until 2011 so that the Olympic experience can be taken into consideration.

SUMMARY

- NORAD is heading for obsolescence. Saving it requires a reversal of the Martin government's decision on missile defence.
- The arrival of the Obama administration provides the Harper government with some political cover to reverse the decision on missile defence. If the government is interested, this could also be the time to explore if both countries want to transform NORAD into a "North American Defence Command," an option dropped by Ottawa in 2002.
- Ottawa may want to seize the Obama moment because of a belief in NORAD's symbolic value and a concern that if NORAD were to disappear, it would be hard to recreate if ever needed. Ottawa might also find the argument convincing that NORAD is a vital conduit to U.S. information and planning.
- Those arguments for retaining NORAD are not strong, though, and it is even harder to argue that NORAD is functionally essential for Canada-U.S. defence co-operation. In other words, Canada does not need to be part of a binational aerospace defence command. Nor is a binational homeland defence command necessary.
- The better course of action would be to let NORAD continue to die, along with what little remains of Canada's broader role in aerospace defence.
- Nonetheless, how to structure Canada-U.S. air defence co-operation in the age of terror remains an important concern to both countries. Important lessons will surely be learned at the 2010 Vancouver Olympic Games, including whether NORAD should be retained as an air defence command. The NORAD review scheduled for 2010 should be postponed until 2011 so the Olympic experience can be taken into consideration.

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