

# POLICY BRIEF



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## NORAD: A History of Institutionalized Cooperation

Jeffrey Rice

*Graduate Fellow at CIDP, and  
PhD Candidate in the Department of Political Studies*

In 2018, the North American Aerospace Defence Command (NORAD) will celebrate 60 years of institutionalized security and defence co-operation between Canada and the United States. In an age of integrated battlefields and un-paralleled information sharing, the symbolism of co-operation that NORAD represents is still unique. To date, NORAD remains the only example of a permanent bi-national command structure in a military organization, with the Commander of NORAD reporting to two separate national chains-of-command: the Prime Minister of Canada and the President of the United States.

And yet, for its supposed importance, it's not altogether clear what Canadians want from NORAD – or even what they get from it. Disagreement persists within the two countries over the threat, if we take the Canadian perspective that inter-continental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) pose to the security of the two countries. With that in mind, it is perhaps a tad naïve to assume that the Americans really *need* Canada in this situation – at one time they did, but with technological advances and the changing nature of security threats (see below), Canada's importance in the agreement is less clear-cut. The agreement, however, persists and the Americans, to their credit, have gone to considerable lengths to assure Canada of its importance in the agreement. With the obvious power asymmetries between the two countries, Canadians should find this to be reassuring, if not also endearing to a

degree. Even when faced with clear fiscal restrictions on defence spending, and even if disagreement persists over the threat posed by ICBMs, it still makes good strategic and diplomatic sense to continue the agreement, given that ballistic missile defence (BMD) is now but one aspect of a rather multi-faceted defence agreement.

### *History*

NORAD, originally called the North American Air Defence Command, was stood up in 1958. Its original purpose was primarily a reflection of the security environment that both the United States and Canada found themselves in at the time: to detect and deter Soviet incursions into North American airspace with the goal of preventing a nuclear strike on the homeland. Its location in Colorado Springs, Colorado, a near midpoint in the continental United States, is indicative of this and was selected on the basis that any Soviet long range bombers would have to traverse a significant amount of North American airspace to reach their destination.

Gradually, the role of NORAD expanded from airspace to aerospace, following the development of ICBMs. In 1981, amid the re-escalation of the Cold War, it was renamed the North American Aerospace Defence Command to reflect the new reality (NORAD's mandate has since been expanded to include monitoring of maritime traffic). Although early detection of Russian long-range bombers remains the cornerstone of the NORAD mandate, the role that the organization currently fulfills in securing the homeland is a far-cry from the days of the Cold War.

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## 9/11: Looking Outward/Looking Inward

Like any security organization that exists in times of environmental and structural change, the purpose and future of NORAD has not always been clear. While reaping the benefits of the so-called peace dividend following the end of the Cold War, NORAD itself fell off the radar of many American and Canadian officials, a trend that would continue throughout the 1990s. This changed on September 11, 2001. The attacks on the World Trade Centre and Pentagon not only had a significant impact on the trajectory and focus of American foreign policy, but it also had a transformative effect on NORAD itself. NORAD's purpose practically changed overnight. Prior to 9/11, NORAD's focus was 'outward.' Its capabilities were designed to monitor for, and respond to, threats originating from outside of North American airspace; it was not tasked with looking for threats originating from within North American airspace – at the time, the idea of an attack from within seemed almost an impossibility. On 9/11, for instance, there were only fourteen fighter jets on alert with intercept capability – by the end of the day nearly 200 fighter jets had been scrambled. After 9/11 the focus of the organization shifted and it now found itself monitoring the airspace over the homeland for threats originating from within North America itself. Although official numbers aren't made public, one can rest assured that there are significantly more than fourteen fighter jets now on stand-by with intercept capability.

With its revised purpose, and in a bid to better protect the mainland, a revamped NORAD has consistently found opportunities to engage with civil authorities in an effort to improve response times to crisis scenarios, if and when they arise. As a result, new avenues for cooperation between civilian and military authorities have emerged in both the realms of aerospace defence and disaster relief. A Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) representative, for example, is now a permanent fixture at the NORAD-NORTHCOM Command-Control Centre (N2C2).

NORAD also shares a mandate with USNORTHCOM, one which overlaps considerably at times, and has been involved in coordinating humanitarian relief efforts in the continental United States following natural disasters – NORAD played a key support role to civil authorities during Hurricane Sandy in 2012.

## What's in it for Canada?

Finally, but perhaps most importantly for Canadian academics and policy-makers, is the Canadian piece to the NORAD puzzle. Given the immense capability of the United States military, and the fact that it spends more than 400x more on defence than does Canada, it is easy to deride Canada's role in NORAD as being purely symbolic – and, truth be told, for the Americans, maybe it is. But with the increasing integration between civ-mil capabilities with NORAD and USNORTHCOM and the expansion into maritime defence, BMD shouldn't be the only consideration when deciding Canada's future in NORAD. A continued investment in NORAD means Canada not only retains a seat at the table and a voice in the defence of North America (not just of Canada), but continues to have access to, at least, some elements of the American domestic information gathering apparatus. Canadians and policy makers alike will have to decide if the costs are worth the returns, but given that defence spending should be – though it isn't always – about the defence of the homeland, NORAD provides what Canada needs in terms of security, information sharing, and institutionalized defence cooperation with its closest ally.