

QUICK IMPACT



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Blackjack Diplomacy

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Russian heavy bombers such as the Tu-95MS BEAR and Tu-160 BLACKJACK continue to conduct regular air patrols in the international airspace along the coastlines of other countries to underscore Russia's capabilities. Russian bomber crews are demonstrating increasing proficiency in their flight activities, developing a new generation of air crews capable of employing this highly visible implement of Russian deterrence and messaging in peacetime, crisis, and war.

Patrols by Russian military aircraft off the coasts of the United States and Canada have grown increasingly complex in recent years. NORAD fighter aircraft routinely intercept Russian military aviation missions inside the U.S. and Canadian Air Defense Identification Zones, and there is no indication that Russian leadership intends to reduce the number of these missions in the near future.

STATEMENT OF GENERAL TERENCE J. O'SHAUGHNESSY, UNITED STATES AIR FORCE, COMMANDER UNITED STATES NORTHERN COMMAND AND NORTH AMERICAN AEROSPACE DEFENSE COMMAND BEFORE THE SENATE ARMED SERVICES COMMITTEE STRATEGIC FORCES SUBCOMMITTEE 3 APRIL 2019¹

Russian bombers have been making visible and regular flights through the Canadian Air Defence Identification Zone (CADIZ) – a sort of tripwire cast across the country's approaches in international airspace – since 2007. Russia's premier bomber, the Tu-160 "Blackjack," has recently joined these flights into the North American Arctic. American and Canadian fighters intercepted two of these bombers in January 2019, with reports suggesting that they were able to do so because they were already patrolling the airspace into which the Tu-160s arrived.² A year later, on 31 January 2020, two Blackjacks left their bases in Western Russia, flew north over the Pole, and entered the CADIZ. They did not violate Canadian airspace, but continued south within the

¹ General Terrence J. O'Shaughnessy, "NORAD and USNORTHCOM COMMANDER SASC STRATEGIC FORCES SUBCOMMITTEE HEARING," *NORAD: Speeches*, 3 April 2019, <https://www.norad.mil/Newsroom/Speeches/Article/1845927/norad-and-usnorthcom-commander-sasc-strategic-forces-subcommittee-hearing/>.

² The Associated Press, "U.S., Canadian fighter planes scramble to escort Russian jets," *CTV News*, 26 January 2019, <https://www.ctvnews.ca/world/u-s-canadian-fighter-planes-scramble-to-escort-russian-jets-1.4270832>. The Tu-160 has been conducting strategic messaging between Russia and the West elsewhere, most notably beginning with the aircraft's provocative 2008 deployment to Venezuela in support of the late Hugo Chavez's regime. "Russian bombers land in Venezuela," *BBC News*, 11 September 2008, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/7609577.stm>.

CADIZ before breaking off and returning to Russia. While North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD) was able to track the aircraft, it did not intercept them with either American fighters based in Alaska or Canadian aircraft based in the south.³

Blackjack flights represent an increased demonstration of capability and thus an amplification of strategic messaging. While a supersonic, long-range strategic bomber with a distinctive variable-geometry (or “swing”) wing analogous to the American B-1 Lancer, the true capability of the Blackjack lies with its payload of new generation Russian cruise missiles. Unlike the 1950s-era Tu-95 “Bear” that were built to carry gravity bombs, the 1980s-era Blackjacks were built specifically to carry cruise missiles. While modernized Bear bombers can carry up to eight advanced cruise missiles externally, the Blackjack can carry twelve within its weapons bays. The Blackjack bomber fleet has undergone modernizations, with a limited production run of new aircraft underway to supplement their numbers, demonstrating the importance Russia attaches to these modern bombers and their superior cruise missile launching capability.⁴

These trans-arctic flights are a form of strategic messaging – demonstrating military capabilities to communicate national intentions.⁵ So too are responses to such activities. Canadian government officials downplayed the offensive messaging of Bear flights through the Canadian ADIZ until May 2014, when they were described as a “response to tensions between the West and Vladimir Putin over Ukraine.” Flights increased in frequency in the ensuing year and Canadian officials interpreted these as Moscow signalling its displeasure when “Western leaders slapped sanctions and heaped condemnation on Russia for its seizure of Ukraine's Black Sea peninsula of Crimea earlier this year.”⁶ In short, they were a response to actions elsewhere in the world.

NORAD officials began applying the strategic messaging label to these Russian bomber flights in North American airspace in early 2015. “They [Russia] are messaging us that they are a global power,” capable of power projection then NORAD Commander Admiral William Gortney told reporters. He continued that, “we do the same sort of thing.” While Adm. Gortney confirmed that the number of Bear bomber flight had

³ Lee Berthiaume, “2 Russian bombers approached Canadian airspace in Arctic, Norad says,” *Global News*, 31 January 2020, <https://globalnews.ca/news/6489830/russian-bombers-canada-norad/> and Bob Weber, “‘Strategic messaging’: Russian fighters in Arctic spark debate on Canada’s place,” *The Star*, 10 February 2019, <https://www.thestar.com/business/2019/02/10/strategic-messaging-russian-fighters-in-arctic-spark-debate-on-canadas-place.html>. Note that NORAD does not always send intercepts to meet Russian bombers as this keeps the Russians guessing.

⁴ Gareth Jennings, “Maiden flight for upgraded Tu-160M bomber,” *Jane’s Information Group*, 7 February 2020, <https://www.janes.com/article/94165/maiden-flight-for-upgraded-tu-160m-bomber> and Douglas Barrie, “Kh-101 missile test highlights Russian bomber firepower,” *IISS Military Balance Blog*, 9 February 2019, <https://www.iiss.org/blogs/military-balance/2019/02/russian-bomber-firepower>.

⁵ Bob Weber, “‘Strategic messaging’: Russian fighters in Arctic spark debate on Canada’s place,” *The Star*, 10 February 2019, <https://www.thestar.com/business/2019/02/10/strategic-messaging-russian-fighters-in-arctic-spark-debate-on-canadas-place.html>.

⁶ Steven Chase, “Russia’s Arctic flybys a ‘strategic’ message,” *Globe and Mail*, 19 June 2014, <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/politics/russias-arctic-flybys-a-strategic-message/article19255529/>.

increased since the Russian annexation of Crimea, he clarified that those flights were adhering to international law and that they were flying in a professional manner.⁷

By early 2016 NORAD officials were informing the public that they considered the newest cruise missiles that Russian bombers could be carrying “a significant security risk” to North America. The capabilities of advanced cruise missiles like the Kh-101 had been demonstrated in late 2015 when Russia launched them from Blackjacks, submarines, and warships against targets in Syria in support of the Assad regime. NORAD Deputy Commander Lieutenant-General Pierre St-Amand warned Canada’s House of Commons Standing Committee on National Defence that the “deployment of advanced cruise missiles” from air and maritime domains against North America “poses a technological challenge from an aerospace defence perspective” in reference to the aging north warning systems NORAD currently had in place.⁸ In short, Russian bomber flights were reinterpreted as a threat to North America, and numerous officials and academics recommended to the committee that these systems be modernized in response to the threat posed by these new cruise missiles.⁹

NORAD amplified its message that new Russian cruise missiles posed a direct threat to North America after the first flight of Tu-160 Blackjack bombers into the North American Arctic in early 2019. NORAD Commander General Terrence O’Shaughnessy told U.S. lawmakers in early 2019 that his command’s ability to provide deterrence across the North American Arctic was eroding due to the growing obsolescence of supporting detection systems. “Improving our ability to detect and defeat cruise missile attacks is among my highest priorities,” he emphasized.¹⁰ The Tu-160 better exploits two major vulnerabilities in NORAD detection and response capabilities. The North Warning System (NWS),¹¹ a network of radars built across the North American Arctic (and down the Pacific and Atlantic coasts and over into Greenland) to warn NORAD of an approaching Soviet attack across the pole, is reported as increasingly obsolescent. It is ill-equipped to detect Russia’s new generation of cruise missiles,¹² the very weapons that the Tu-160 is designed to deliver. Second, the Tu-160’s great speed – able to travel at MACH 2 – aggravates the NWS’s inability to detect incoming bombers before they are close enough to launch these dangerous cruise missiles into North America.¹³ “To

⁷ Aaron Mehta, “NORAD Head: Russian Bombers Send a Message,” *DefenseNews*, 7 April 2015, <https://www.defensenews.com/air/2015/04/07/norad-head-russian-bombers-send-a-message/>.

⁸ House of Commons Standing Committee on National Defence, “Canada and the Defence of North America: NORAD and Aerial Readiness,” September 2016, 15-6, <https://www.ourcommons.ca/Content/Committee/421/NDDN/Reports/RP8406082/nddnrp02/nddnrp02-e.pdf>.

⁹ Standing Committee on National Defence, “Canada and the Defence of North America,” 51.

¹⁰ O’Shaughnessy, “NORAD and USNORTHCOM COMMANDER SASC STRATEGIC FORCES SUBCOMMITTEE HEARING.”

¹¹ On the increasing obsolescence of the NWS, see Andrea Charron and James Fergusson, “Beyond NORAD and the Modernization to North American Defence Evolution,” *Canadian Global Affairs Institute*, May 2017, https://www.cgai.ca/beyond_norad_and_modernization_to_north_american_defence_evolution; “NORAD: Beyond Modernization,” *Centre for Defence and Security Studies*, 31 January 2019, https://umanitoba.ca/centres/cdss/media/NORAD_beyond_modernization_2019.pdf and “Rediscovering the Costs of Deterrence,” *Canadian Global Affairs Institute*, September 2019, https://www.cgai.ca/rediscovering_the_cost_of_deterrence.

¹² “Canada, U.S. must do more to check Russia’s military moves in the Arctic, says NORAD chief,” *CBC News*, 12 February 2019, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/russia-arctic-norad-missiles-1.5016654>.

¹³ Berthiaume, “2 Russian bombers approached Canadian airspace in Arctic.”

safeguard our citizens and critical infrastructure, and to preserve our ability to rapidly project power abroad,” O’Shaughnessy declare, “it will be necessary to take deliberate and focused measures to improve our cruise missile defenses.”¹⁴

What these measures would look like became clearer and more urgent in the wake of the January 2020 Blackjack flight. NORAD has developed a Homeland Defense Design (HDD) to guide modernization, which calls for a layered sensing system for multiple domain awareness, a new system for joint multi-domain command and control, and “new defeat mechanisms for advanced threats, including cruise missiles, ballistic missiles, hypersonic weapons, and small unmanned aerial systems.”¹⁵ This strategic messaging, directed at domestic audiences to convince them to invest in an expensive suite of new continental defence capabilities, must build a compelling and credible narrative about the threat posed by Russian strategic delivery systems.¹⁶

This messaging must also manage political and popular expectations. General O’Shaughnessy identified the simple reality that “the cost ratio of adversary threat missiles to our missile defeat mechanisms is not in our favor” as the major obstacle confronting NORAD. The binational command must “flip the cost ratio back in our favor with deep magazine, rapid fire, and low-cost defeat mechanisms.” This does not mean developing a perfect “homeland security system,” but a sufficiently capable defence to credibly deter these new Russian threats.¹⁷ Commodore Jamie Clarke, NORAD’s deputy director of strategy, warns that time is running out to get these modernized systems into place to deter would-be adversaries from acting against North America. “We cannot deter what we cannot defeat,” Clarke explains, “and we cannot defeat what we cannot detect.” Progress on replacing obsolescent detection equipment like the NWS with modernized, layered sensing systems is being made but is taking “longer than any of us would like.”¹⁸

Conclusions

This is not the first time that a peer competitor has elected to hold our homeland at risk. Early in NORAD’s history, when nuclear-armed Soviet bombers first presented an existential threat to the United States and Canada, our nations faced down that daunting challenge by establishing the Distant Early Warning line of radars and the Semi-Automatic Ground Environment (SAGE) command and control system in less than three years. That stunning achievement demonstrated the power of shared resolve and innovation by our great nations and had an immediate deterrent effect. We hear echoes of that era in today’s strategic environment, and while the challenges before us are significant, history makes clear that innovation and resolve will allow us to bolster our strategic advantage.

¹⁴ O’Shaughnessy, “NORAD and USNORTHCOM COMMANDER SASC STRATEGIC FORCES SUBCOMMITTEE HEARING.”

¹⁵ General Terrence J. O’Shaughnessy, “STATEMENT OF GENERAL TERRENCE J. O’SHAUGHNESSY,” *Senate Armed Services Committee*, 13 February 2020, 9, https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/download/oshughnessy_02-13-20.

¹⁶ For more on Canadian and Russian ‘dual-track’ messaging about the Arctic to their international and domestic audiences, see P. Whitney Lackenbauer, “Mirror Images? Canada, Russia, and the Circumpolar World,” *International Journal* 65:4 (2010): 879-897.

¹⁷ O’Shaughnessy, “STATEMENT OF GENERAL TERRENCE J. O’SHAUGHNESSY,” 10.

¹⁸ Canadian Press, “Senior officer warns NORAD can’t detect Russian bombers in time, needs upgrades.”

STATEMENT OF GENERAL TERENCE J. O'SHAUGHNESSY, UNITED STATES AIR FORCE COMMANDER
UNITED STATES NORTHERN COMMAND AND NORTH AMERICAN AEROSPACE DEFENSE COMMAND,
BEFORE THE SENATE ARMED SERVICES COMMITTEE, 13 FEBRUARY 2020¹⁹

Russian bomber flights into the CADIZ are a form of strategic messaging that signals to the international community that the Russian Federation is still a great power that can project force into the Arctic and elsewhere in the world.²⁰ Political scientists Andrea Charron and Jim Fergusson observe that the cruise missiles that these bombers carry provide “Russia with a valuable tool for coercive diplomacy, central to the doctrine of ‘escalation to de-escalate,’ that could undermine the credibility of western deterrence, which would then rest upon the threat of strategic nuclear retaliation with all its credibility concerns.”²¹ Any cruise missile attack against North America in an effort to secure advantage elsewhere in the world, however, would result in massive American retaliation, not escalation.²² Hence the threat of a cruise missile attack from the Arctic against the North American political and industrial heartland constitutes either a strategic bluff or the first strike in an all-out war. From this North American perspective, bomber flights into the CADIZ demonstrate that Russia maintains a viable strategic deterrent.

Strategic messaging is also directed towards domestic audiences.²³ From a North American perspective, NORAD strategic messaging is establishing a narrative designed to lay the political groundwork for Canadian and American taxpayers to make substantial investments in modernizing continental defences. NORAD is competing for scarce resources against other defence projects in both the United States and Canada. While Canada’s 2017 defence policy *Strong, Secure, Engaged* is “the most rigorously costed Canadian defence policy ever developed,” it does not include the costing of NORAD modernization and renewal in its funded commitments over the next decade (estimated at \$32.7 billion in 2026-27).²⁴ “In the case of the NWS, the estimated cost is in the billions of dollars of spending,” Charron and Fergusson note. “While there is lots of attention to and discussion of the projects, there is next to no discussion around the costs or plans to pay for

¹⁹ O’Shaughnessy, “STATEMENT OF GENERAL TERENCE J. O’SHAUGHNESSY,” 13.

²⁰ See, for example, Scott Borgerson and Michael Byers, “The Arctic Front in the Battle to Contain Russia,” *Wall Street Journal*, 8 March 2016, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-arctic-front-in-the-battle-to-contain-russia-1457478393>; Michael E. Miller, “Arctic ‘chill’ as Russia reverts to Cold War air and sea confrontations,” *The Washington Post*, 17 April 2015, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2015/04/17/arctic-chill-as-russia-reverts-to-cold-war-air-and-sea-confrontations/>; and Luke Harding and Ewen MacAskill, “Putin revives long-range bomber patrols,” *The Guardian*, 18 August 2007, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2007/aug/18/russia.ewenmacaskill>.

²¹ Andrea Charron and James Fergusson, “NORAD and the Evolution of North American Defence,” *Inside Policy*, 24 May 2017, <https://www.macdonaldlaurier.ca/norad-and-the-evolution-of-north-american-defence-andrea-charron-and-james-fergusson-for-inside-policy/>.

²² For more on the history of NORAD and the American deterrent, see Joseph T. Jockel, *No Boundaries Upstairs: Canada, the United States, and the Origins of North American Air Defence, 1945-1958* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1987).

²³ For more on Canadian and Russian ‘dual-track’ messaging about the Arctic to their international and domestic audiences, see P. Whitney Lackenbauer, “Mirror Images? Canada, Russia, and the Circumpolar World,” *International Journal* 65:4 (2010): 879-897.

²⁴ Department of National Defence, “Executive Summary to *Strong, Secure, Engaged*,” <https://www.canada.ca/en/department-national-defence/corporate/reports-publications/canada-defence-policy/executive-summary.html>.

them. This, for Canada and NORAD, is the elephant in the room.”²⁵ For these reasons, NORAD’s public identification of Russian bomber flights in the Arctic as an existential threat to North America represents a form of strategic messaging intended to justify funding to modernize continental defences.²⁶

Further Readings:

Canada. House of Commons Standing Committee on National Defence. “Canada and the Defence of North America: NORAD and Aerial Readiness.” September 2016. <https://www.ourcommons.ca/Content/Committee/421/NDDN/Reports/RP8406082/nddnrp02/nddnrp02-e.pdf>.

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²⁵ Andrea Charron and James Fergusson, “The Elephant in the Room: Canada and NORAD Modernization,” in *The Strategic Outlook for Canada 2018* (Ottawa: Conference of Defence Associations Institute, 2018), 32, <https://cdainstitute.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/36-THE-STRATEGIC-OUTLOOK-FOR.pdf>. See also The Canadian Press, “Aging NORAD warning system can’t detect Russian bombers in time, Canadian officer warns,” *Global News*, 29 January 2020, <https://globalnews.ca/news/6480258/norad-system-russian-bombers-outdated/>.

²⁶ See, for example, National Defence, “All Domain Situational Awareness (ADSA) S&T Program,” June 2019, 2, <https://www.canada.ca/content/dam/drdc-rddc/documents/en/adsa-bg.pdf>.