

QUICK IMPACT



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We Cannot *Deter* What We Cannot *Detect*

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“We cannot deter what we cannot defeat, and we cannot defeat what we cannot detect.” Canadian [Commodore Jamie Clarke, the deputy director of strategy at NORAD, reiterated this statement in January 2020](#) as a way to justify NORAD modernization and replacing the aging North Warning System (NWS). This same talking point has been used repeatedly by NORAD/USNORTHCOM Commander General Terrence O’Shaughnessy, most notably in his appearances before the US Senate Armed Services Committee in [April 2019](#) and [February 2020](#), and the US House Armed Services Committee in [March 2020](#).

Peace researcher [Ernie Regehr recently pointed out](#) that this phrase “seems to run counter to decades of defence policy and practice.” He explains that there is no way to defeat a strategic nuclear attack against North America by a major power like China or Russia. Instead, deterrence remains the most viable option. We agree.

Our reading is that the logic of the NORAD/NORTHCOM talking point is backwards: it should emphasize that we cannot deter what we cannot detect, yet it can be possible to deter threats that you cannot defeat. One must be able to detect a threat in order to deter or defeat it. Similarly, one can be strong enough to deter an attacker (with fear of devastating reprisal or through denial) without being strong enough to defeat the attacker outright. Hence an emphasis on ‘defeat’ represents the highest level of aspiration, and the last step in the logic of ‘detect, deter, defeat.’

We concur with [Gen. O’Shaughnessy’s statement to Senate Armed Services subcommittee on readiness in March 2020](#) that “the threats facing the United States and Canada are real and significant,” and that “the Arctic is no longer a fortress wall, and our oceans are no longer protective moats; they are now avenues of approach for advanced conventional weapons and the platforms that carry them.” He elaborates that:

The Arctic is the new frontline of our homeland defense as it provides our adversaries with a direct avenue of approach to the homeland and is representative of the changing strategic environment in our area of responsibility. More consistently navigable waters, mounting demand for natural resources, and Russia’s military buildup in the region make the Arctic an immediate challenge for USNORTHCOM, NORAD, our northern allies, and our neighboring geographic combatant commands, U.S. European Command and U.S. Indo-Pacific Command.

By fielding advanced, long-range cruise missiles - to include land attack missiles capable of striking the United States and Canada from Russian territory - and expanding its military presence in the region, Russia has left us with no choice but to improve our homeland defense capability and

capacity. In the meantime, China has taken a number of incremental steps toward expanding its own Arctic presence.

As a solution, O’Shaughnessy emphasizes the importance of advanced sensors that can “detect, track, and discriminate advanced cruise missiles, ballistic missiles, hypersonics, and small unmanned aerial systems at the full ranges from which they are employed,” as well as “detect and track the platforms - aircraft, ships, and submarines - that carry those weapons.” However Gen. O’Shaughnessy goes on to state that “the Homeland is not a sanctuary” and thus “we require new defeat mechanisms for advance threat systems - to include the advanced cruise missiles capable of striking the homeland from launch boxes in the Arctic.”¹

NORAD was never designed to defeat a full-scale Soviet air attack. As Regehr notes, the binational command’s mission was to detect a Soviet attack by air, giving as much advanced warning as possible to mobilize and launch the American nuclear arsenal in retaliation. Political scientist Joseph Jockel, in his masterful study on early Cold War continental air defence co-operation, has shown how American and Canadian defence planners determined by the late 1940s that an active air defence of North America could not stop every bomber from getting through to its target.² This necessitated a conceptual shift from ‘defeating’ an air attack outright towards ‘detering’ one through threat of punishment. The prospect of massive nuclear retaliation, and thus inevitable destruction, dissuaded an enemy from thinking it could ‘defeat’ North America. If continental air defence was built on a postwar recognition that “[no boundaries upstairs](#)” meant danger, NORAD’s creation in 1958 was to ensure that there would be no *political* boundaries upstairs impeding this deterrence mission.

Regehr posits that the emphasis on ‘defeat’ by NORAD officials could be ‘aspirational,’ noting an intention to upgrade Ballistic Missile Defence (BMD) towards a more “impenetrable shield against strategic weapons is not a new dream, like the Star Wars scheme imagined by Ronald Reagan in the 1980s.” BMD as it currently stands is designed and messaged around thwarting a limited attack from rogue actors like North Korea and Iran, not major nuclear strikes by Russia or China. Introducing general language around ‘defeating’ threats revises this, conveying the possible intention – when taken to its logical extension – of overturning the strategic balance of mutually assured destruction towards one of what [John J. Mearsheimer calls ‘nuclear supremacy’](#) – where America can strike where it wants and be impervious to retaliation.

If the NORAD commander’s declarations represent a fundamental change in U.S. strategic direction, it may reflect his USNORTHCOM hat more than his NORAD one. Does ‘defeat’ connote that NORAD should assume an offensive role, as [Andrea Charron and Jim Fergusson speculate](#)? This entails NORAD assets to pre-emptively strike at long-range weapon platforms so that they can defeat an imminent attack against North America – what they refer to as defeating the ‘archers’ rather than the ‘arrows’? Regehr suggests that most Canadians would not accept this kind of pre-emptive strike role (which would likely invite a strategic nuclear exchange), and we are inclined to agree with him.

General O’Shaughnessy notes that “our adversaries have the ability to threaten our homeland in multiple domains and from numerous avenues of approach - and our commands are especially focused on improving our ability to defend our northern approaches.” This is an important point, and we worry that blanket strategic messaging about the need to *defeat* threats – which could imply *all* threats – across *all domains* sets up

unrealistic political and public expectations that NORAD can and must *defeat* every threat to North America. Instead, North Americans should have confidence that we have robust, reliable, and layered systems that allow us to detect threats to the continent, defeat some threats, and deter all threats by ensuring we project a credible message that we are capable of counter-striking at any attacker posing an existential threat to our homelands.

Furthermore, it is in the interests of the North American allies to ensure that strategic messaging does not bring about undesirable escalation. “The cost ratio of adversary threat missiles to our missile defeat mechanisms is not in our favor,” General O’Shaughnessy emphasized on 20 March. “We must flip the cost ratio back in our favor with deep magazine, rapid fire, and low-cost defeat mechanisms.” By emphasizing *defeating* these threat systems rather than deterring potential major power adversaries from employing them, we might run the risk of generating an arms race in specific domains in which our adversaries could exploit a competitive advantage.

Traditional deterrence by punishment still has its place. By intimating that we intend to defeat Chinese and Russian strategic delivery systems, we could destabilize the deterrence regime that has safeguarded against a nuclear or conventional military attack on North America since the early Cold War. This could lead us to divert unnecessary resources to achieve the same desired end state of stability and security from attack by nuclear or conventional forces in the land, sea, and aerospace domains – resources that could otherwise be directed towards defences in domains where defeating threats is essential. [Deterrence by punishment may not work in the cyber domain](#), for example, and the rise of below threshold tactics and hybrid warfare in the ‘grey zone’ may require deterrence through denial and the outright need to defeat state and non-state actors’ efforts to ‘weaponize’ information operations. Simply put, we are concerned that messaging insisting that NORAD must develop the capabilities to ‘defeat’ threats in all domains runs the risk of destabilizing the strategic balance with major power competitors, undermining traditional deterrence where it is still effective, and ultimately misdirecting resources by trying to defeat threats that can be effectively deterred if we develop the capabilities to detect them.

In short, we caution against a strategic message that, in our view, promotes a logical fallacy. The expectations embedded in the “we cannot deter what we cannot defeat, and we cannot defeat what we cannot detect” formulation confuses the public about how NORAD has practiced deterrence by punishment and denial. We suggest that strategic messaging to justify NORAD modernization and replacing the NWS would benefit from a rephrasing of the central talking point to emphasize that “We Cannot *Deter* What We Cannot *Detect*.” And, as Regehr states, “We *Must* Deter What We Cannot *Defeat*.”

Notes

¹ [USNORTHCOM lists the missions for itself and NORAD](#) as “deters, detects, and defeats threats to the United States,” and “deters, detects, and defeats air threats to the United States and Canada and provides aerospace and maritime warning” respectively. The [NORAD Agreement](#) lists the binational command’s missions as: 1) aerospace warning; 2) aerospace control; and 3) maritime warning for all for North America.

² See Joseph Jockel, *No Boundaries Upstairs: Canada, the United States, and the Origins of North American Air Defence, 1945-1958* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1987), and Fred Kaplan, *The Wizards of Armageddon* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991).