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Permanency, Reassurance, and Quiet Diplomacy

The Permanent Joint Board on Defence (PJBD) at Eighty

P. Whitney Lackenbauer¹
Network Lead, NAADSN

On 16 August 1940, President Franklin D. Roosevelt telephoned Prime Minister William Lyon Mackenzie King and invited him to a meeting in his private railcar in Ogdensburg, New York, just across the border from Prescott, Ontario, to “talk over the defence matters between Canada and the U.S. together.” King “greatly rejoiced over the President’s invitation,”² and the next day drove down with Pierrepoint Moffat, the US Minister in Ottawa, arriving in time for dinner at 7:00 p.m. “Inside [the] President [was] sitting in [the] corner with his white shirt enjoying soda lemonade along with Secretary of State for War Mr. [Henry] Stimson and one or two of the President’s staff,” King recorded in his [trusted diary](#). “The President greeted me with his usual smile and hearty handshake.” The two leaders “talked the evening away,” then resumed their conversation the following day,³ culminating in the issuing of a landmark press release known as the [Ogdensburg Declaration](#):

The Prime Minister and the President have discussed the mutual problems of defence in relation to the safety of Canada and the United States.

It has been agreed that a Permanent Joint Board on Defence shall be set up at once by the two countries.

This Permanent Joint Board on Defence shall commence immediate studies relating to sea, land, and air problems, including personnel and material.

It will consider in the broad sense the defence of the north half of the Western Hemisphere.

The Permanent Joint Board on Defence will consist of four or five members from each country, most of them from the services. It will meet shortly.

Eighty years later, this Permanent Joint Board on Defence (PJBD) remains a fixture in Canada-U.S. defence cooperation.

When I was invited to join a panel discussion on the PJBD at a [conference in Washington in January](#) of this year, I was honoured and more than a little intimidated. My colleagues on the panel had much more intimate experience with the Board and, after a bit of sober reflection, I realized my knowledge about the PJBD in actual operation – at least not beyond its first couple of decades – is actually quite limited. I doubt that I am alone on

that count. Nevertheless, I have always recognized the PJBD's importance as a symbol of bilateral defence cooperation. Just as the idea of the "longest undefended border in the world" came into vogue during the interwar period when academics began naturalizing the commonalities between Canada and the US as North American neighbours,⁴ since the Second World War the PJBD has become a touchstone of the friendly alliance that we enjoy. There is tremendous value in having a permanent consultative and problem-solving forum, marked by a spirit of frankness and informal information exchange outside of the media spotlight, that provides critical senior military and diplomatic contact *and* affirms strategic messaging about our shared commitment to the defence of North America.

Roosevelt and King laid the groundwork in 1938 when they made their famous statements affirming that neither nation would stand idly by if the other were attacked. But a hiatus in military liaison between the two countries from January 1938 until July 1940 left the matter in limbo.⁵ In the interval, Canada went to war while the United States remained neutral.

Successive waves of allied disaster in the spring and early summer of 1940 made Canadians apprehensive over their future security, and Canada took the initiative and attempted to re-establish defence liaison that June. A military relationship between a belligerent and a neutral raised political issues in the United States, and the American administration approached the Canadian proposals with some trepidation, but high-level staff talks were held in July, focusing primarily on defence if Britain should fall to Germany. The following month, Roosevelt suggested machinery for joint defence planning, and Mackenzie King warmly accepted this "grandiose political gesture."⁶ As the US Chairman of the PJBD summarized at its 150th meeting, it was amidst "the calamitous situation in Europe" of 1940 that:

the former anxiety of both Canada and the United States to avoid international entanglements gave way to a jointly-held realization that the North American continent was no longer immune to the threat of aggression. Discussions between President Roosevelt and Prime Minister King in July led, on August 16, 1940, to the historic meeting in Ogdensburg, New York. Few realized at the time that this brief joint statement had in fact moved Canada and the United States from a position of friendly cooperation into one of positive alliance.⁷

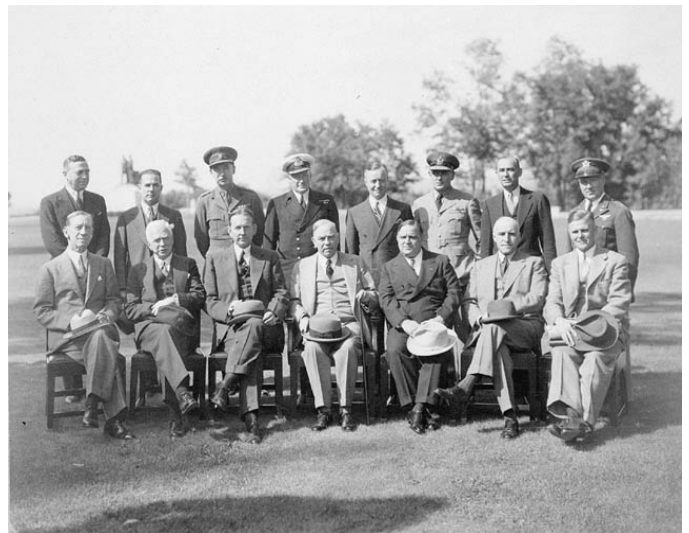
The Ogdensburg Agreement did not invest the PJBD with executive authority – it was a coordinating agency that produced recommendations requiring executive approval by the President in the United States and the Cabinet War Committee in Canada. For Roosevelt, this Executive Agreement created a mechanism that allowed him to communicate directly with Canadians and form a *de facto* alliance without Congressional approval or ratification. The key word, however, was that it was intended to be *permanent*. Sure, this was a political means for FDR to suggest that this bilateral board was not merely a short-term ploy to get around neutrality. It also served as a strategic signal.

The dean of Canadian military history, C.P. Stacey, noted that the creation of the PJBD marked the final step in the historical progression of the two countries from hostility to alliance.⁸ Canadian historians often treat it as

a turning point: a fork in the road away from Britain towards America, if you follow Donald Creighton's British Canadian conservative nationalist lament;⁹ or the result of "how Britain's weakness forced Canada into the Arms of the Americans," to borrow the title of J.L. Granatstein's 1988 Joanne Goodman lecture.¹⁰ However one chooses to frame it, this "experiment in international organization" and "innovation in both Canadian and American external policy" (as C.P. Stacey put it)¹¹ was fortuitous for Canada, setting up a tidy and functional forum to *study and consider* defence issues. This was an orientation with which it is difficult to disagree.

The first meeting of the Board took place in Ottawa on 26 August 1940, chaired on the United States side by Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia of New York City and on the Canadian side by a prominent lawyer, Oliver Mowat Biggar. Working in secrecy, it met thirty-eight times during the Second World War, making a total of thirty-three formal recommendations to the two Governments dealing with such disparate questions as coastal defense, safety of navigation through the Sault Ste. Marie canals and coordination of aviation training. It was also the means by which most of the joint Canadian-American defence projects in the Canadian North were initiated.¹² In 1978, the US chairman noted:

Aside from its more formal functions, the Board was rapidly recognized as a useful forum for many of the activities it is engaged in to this day: negotiating defense questions in a setting where both military and diplomatic viewpoints are present, hastening executive action, smoothing out difficulties, and conducting an extremely important exchange of defense information.¹³



Historian Christopher Conliffe observed that the PJBD had less to do once the US became an official belligerent in December 1941, and it "ended the war quite quietly." He talks about six phases in the evolution of the PJBD until 1988:

- Phase 1 – 1940-45: The War Years
- Phase 2 – 1945-50: Uncertainty
- Phase 3 – 1950-53: The Last Fling
- Phase 4 – 1954-59: Decline
- Phase 5 – 1960-63: Eclipse
- Phase 6 – 1963-88: Limbo¹⁴

In Conliffe's narrative, questions of continental air defence came to the fore in 1950 and gave the Board, as a collaborative body, a clear role in considering how best to rationalize resources to defend against a clear enemy

across the North Pole. I spend a lot of time reconstructing Canada-US continental defence imperatives in the 1950s. The archival record shows how closely involved the PJBD was in the three radar “fences” constructed over the northerly latitudes of the continent – most famously the Distant Early Warning (DEW) Line, of course – and it concerned itself with planning for North American defence throughout that decade. As the perceived Soviet threat to North America became more direct and acute after 1954, however, much of the planning shifted to the military staffs of both countries. For example, the PJBD’s role with respect to the Ballistic Missile Early Warning System (BMEWS) and the establishment of the North American Air (now Aerospace) Defense Command (NORAD) was mainly facilitative.¹⁵

Perhaps this was this a sign of relative decline, as Conliffe and other suggest. But highly successful Canada-US cooperation in the field of SOSUS (underwater acoustic surveillance systems) was initiated through the Board, and there are many other examples of substantive deliberations on radar coverage, air defence concepts and modernization options, standardization, and interoperability over the years. Furthermore, as a US Chairman noted, meetings always involved:

a good deal of off-the-record discussion among members which was instrumental in the resolution or, at least, the clarification of a number of crucial matters. The opportunity to conduct informal bilateral discussions among the members, all of whom are involved from day to day in North American defense policy planning, has become one of the great strengths of the Board.¹⁶

The opportunities that the PJBD has afford representatives from both countries to exchange views and grapple with politically-sensitive topics, with complete candour, both on and off the record (which is itself secret), should not be overlooked.

But can the Board be improved? How can its value be enhanced? These have been persistent questions ever since. Back in 1958, debate swirled around whether the PJBD’s assigned role should continue to be a “watch function, surveying the various critical areas and situations in the world which were becoming of increasing concern to Canada,” as the Canadian Ambassador in Washington, Norman Robertson, suggested. The Board had been formed “when there was no such thing as a Joint Staff either in Washington or London,” Chairman of the Chiefs of Staff General Charles Foulkes noted, and “many of the problems which were originally assigned to the PJBD were currently resolved by direct consultation between the chairmen of the respective Joint Staffs, or between the Joint Staffs themselves.”¹⁷ Did its membership and terms of reference still make sense in light of this reality? The details are no longer relevant, but the spirit of questioning and seeking opportunities for greater effectiveness and relevance rings true in changing geostrategic and political contexts.

In March 1971, at the 126th meeting, the Canadians reported that the defence minister, Donald Macdonald, wanted the board to “play a particularly significant role in this process of consultation [on continental defence] inasmuch as it brings together not only the civilian and military elements of the two Governments but provides a forum for frank, informal, off-the-record exchanges of views.”¹⁸ PJBD discussions facilitated “greater

awareness of our respective viewpoints and requirements” – and, to quote a statement at the June 1971 meeting, “were designed to ensure that we understood each other’s viewpoints, even where we might differ.”¹⁹ It was not about superficial agreement or platitudes - it was about discerning differences in perspectives, and understanding the reasons behind them, so that workable plans could be crafted and, where appropriate, promoted. Seven years later, the Canadian chairman John Aird confirmed that:

in recent years the Board’s most useful role has been in assuring that medium and long-range plans for North American defence are formulated in full knowledge of, and in harmony with, one another's thinking. It enables us to understand one another's position so that consultations can be carried out on a firm basis of knowledge. In other words, we try to minimize unhappy surprises and to ensure coordination. Moreover, most of the issues of which we are seized have political implications which transcend technical military considerations which, of themselves, are the business of the Canada-United States Military Cooperation Committee.

The Board, because of the composition of its membership, the prestige and experience it has acquired over the years, and the flexibility of its procedures, is uniquely qualified to deal with the complex and often sensitive issues arising from the question of North American defence. The Board will have a valuable role to play as long as there is a need for the joint defence of this continent.²⁰

But was the PJBD just waiting in “limbo” after 1964, as Conliffe suggested, dealing with merely “military trivia” in a holding pattern in case it could play a relevant and effective role if a new crisis emerged?²¹ Declassified minutes from the 1970s and 1980s might yield a more optimistic appraisal. As the highest-level bilateral defence forum, the Board played a quiet but useful role in facilitating agreements, such as Strategic Air Command (SAC)/Aerospace Defence Command (ADCOM) Emergency Dispersal, those dealing with the air bases at Goose Bay and Argentia, and renewals of the NORAD agreement. It was also instrumental in setting up joint working and steering groups on the Airborne Warning and Control System (AWACS) and sharing of North American air defense responsibilities (including the modernization of the DEW Line into the North Warning System). Equally useful was its continuing role in facilitating information sharing, consultation, and participation in policy formulation. “The Board has also never hesitated to air potential irritants or problems,” a US chairman noted in the late 1970s. “Fortunately the list of these is short, but two examples are the sale of Canadian submersibles, and United States foreign military sales legislation.”²²

I have never read PJBD meeting minutes beyond the early 1980s, but participants in the January 2020 conference on the Board provided rich insights. It influenced the decision to proceed with the North American Air Defence Modernization program in 1985; grappled with issues of missile defence, maritime defence, and asymmetric threats in the 2000s;²³ and recently provided strategic guidance to enable NORAD Strategic Review. It also expanded its scope to focus on security more broadly, bringing the Department of Homeland Security and Public Safety Canada to the joint advisory table. Like most Americans and Canadians, I have no access

whatsoever to the proceedings – the minutes are not public, the PJBD has no web presence, and press releases are rare to non-existent. I have to go by what I hear from others.

Opinions are mixed on the Board's ongoing relevance and vitality. Did the [creation of US Northern Command \(NORTHCOM\)](#) in 2002 relegate it to the periphery of any meaningful role, with only symbolic value and low cost precluding it from being shut down? Dr. Andrea Charron told a parliamentary committee in 2018 that the Board "seems to need life support."²⁴ The year before, Paul Heimbecker told a committee that the regular Board meetings remain a quiet, useful tool for military and political diplomacy to share insights into political attitudes in Ottawa and Washington. "I don't know that it needs to do much more than to be," he testified. "It's easier to keep something running than it is to create it when it's gone. I think that that's largely the case with the PJBD. It brings senior military people and senior political people together, and it creates a degree of common understanding that you wouldn't get otherwise. It's insurance against the day when it might be needed."²⁵

In a world of renewed great power competition and a growing recognition that the "[homeland is not a sanctuary](#)," having a joint strategic advisory body designed to take a sober, long-term view of bilateral defence cooperation between Canada and the United States remains both attractive and highly relevant. As a senior military official who had served for three years on the PJBD noted at the January conference, our European allies "envy that Canada gets to have this kind of conversation with the United States." The PJBD reinforces a [longstanding, well-entrenched relationship](#), rooted in deep trust, and can be easily underestimated as a forum to highlight problems and seek consensus on approaches or solutions to delicate political issues that can be proposed to the President and Prime Minister for decision. In reporting on bi-annual discussions directly to these leaders in an advisory capacity, it operates quietly alongside other mechanisms for dialogue (including NORAD, the Military Cooperation Committee, continuous staff talks, Tri-Command Framework, and various Whole-of-Government and civil assistance planning bodies), to maintain effective and harmonious defence cooperation. To measure its value by political or media profile is to miss the point entirely. It is also telling that, eighty years after its creation and despite the secrecy surrounding its proceedings, academics, military officials, and politicians continue to point regularly to the PJBD as a tangible example of *enduring* bilateral cooperation, friendship, and trust is telling. "We all agreed that it really would help materially to win approval for what we are planning in the way of a Joint Board to work out mutual problems of defence," Prime Minister [King noted in his diary](#) after his 17 August 1940 dinner with President Roosevelt. What they created remains a strong testament that, even though tumultuous weather can affect elite-level political atmospherics in our respective capitals, the climate of continental defence cooperation between our countries has remained favourable for the last eight decades.

Notes

¹ This Quick Impact is based upon remarks delivered at [“The US-Canada Permanent Joint Board on Defense at 80: How Permanent? How Joint?” Conference](#), Washington, DC, 17 January 2020. Thanks to Jennifer Arthur-Lackenbauer, Dr. Andrea Charron, Ryan Dean, Dr. Shannon Nash, and Dr. Nancy Teeple for their helpful feedback on ideas and drafts.

² William Lyon Mackenzie King [Diary, 16 August 1940](#).

³ Christopher Conliffe, “The Permanent Joint Board on Defence,” *Canadian Defence Quarterly* (Summer 1988): 54-55.

⁴ On this theme, see Carl Berger, “Internationalism, Continentalism, and the Writing of History: Comments on the Carnegie Series on the Relations of Canada and the United States,” in *The Influence of the United States on Canadian Development: Eleven Case Studies*, ed. R.A. Preston (Durham: Duke University Press, 1972): 32-54.

⁵ For a comprehensive discussion, see Galen Perras, *Franklin Roosevelt and the Origins of the Canadian-American Security Alliance, 1933-1945: Necessary, But Not Necessary Enough* (New York: Praeger, 1998).

⁶ Christopher Conliffe, “The Permanent Joint Board on Defense, 1940-1988,” in *The US-Canada Security Relationship: The Politics, Strategy, and Technology of Defense*, eds. David Haglund and Joel Sokolsky (Boulder: Westview, 1989), 162.

⁷ Minutes of the 150th meeting of the PJBD, 13-16 June 1978, Department of National Defence (DND) Directorate of History and Heritage (DHH), acquired through Access to Information (ATIP). Thanks to Dr. Adam Lajeunesse for sharing these records with me.

⁸ C.P. Stacey, “The Canadian-American Permanent Joint Board on Defence, 1940-1945,” *International Journal* 9/2 (1954): 107-24.

⁹ Donald Creighton, *The Forked Road: Canada 1939-1957* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1976).

¹⁰ J.L. Granatstein, *How Britain's Weakness Forced Canada into the Arms of the United States* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1989). He also depicted the PJBD's creation as marking Canada's shift from British dominion to American protectorate. See R.D. Cuff and Granatstein, *Ties that Bind: Canadian-American Relations in Wartime* (Toronto: Samuel Stevens Hakkert, 1977), 101.

¹¹ Stacey, “Canadian-American Permanent Joint Board on Defence,” 107.

¹² The structure, operation, and work of the PJBD has been examined in detail by the official military historians of both countries. See C.P. Stacey, *Arms Men and Governments: The War Policies of Canada 1939-1945* (Ottawa, Queen's Printer, 1970), and Stanley W. Dziuban, *Military Relations Between the United States and Canada 1939-1945* (Washington: Office of the Chief of Military History, Department of the Army, 1959). See also David Beatty, “The Canada-United States Permanent Joint Board on Defense” (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Michigan, 1969).

¹³ Minutes of the 150th meeting of the PJBD, 13-16 June 1978.

¹⁴ Conliffe, “Permanent Joint Board on Defense, 1940-1988,” 150.

¹⁵ See also Joseph Jockel, *No Boundaries Upstairs: Canada, the United States, and the Origins of North American Air Defence, 1945-1958* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 1987); Matthew Trudgen, “The Search for Continental Security: The Development of the North American Air Defence System, 1949 to 1956” (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Queen's University, 2011); and Richard Goette, *Sovereignty and Command in Canada-US Continental Air Defence, 1940-57* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2018).

¹⁶ Minutes of the 150th meeting of the PJBD, 13-16 June 1978.

¹⁷ Quoted in [Meeting of Consultation between representatives of the Canadian and USA Governments, 19 November 1958](#), *Documents on Canadian External Relations* vol. 25 (1958), doc. 133.

¹⁸ Minutes of the 126th meeting of the PJBD, 1-5 March 1971, DHH, acquired through ATIP.

¹⁹ Journal of Discussions and Decisions of PJBD meeting, 21-25 June 1971, DHH, acquired through ATIP.

²⁰ Minutes of the 150th meeting of the PJBD, 13-16 June 1978.

²¹ Conliffe, “The Permanent Joint Board on Defense, 1940-1988,” 162.

²² Minutes of the 150th meeting of the PJBD, 13-16 June 1978.

²³ 37th Parliament, 1st Session, *Hansard*, Number 028, [14 March 2001](#).

²⁴ Dr. Andrea Charron before the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development, Number 111, 1st Session, 42nd Parliament, [24 October 2018](#).

²⁵ Paul Heimbecker before the Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development, Number 57, 1st Session, 42nd Parliament, [13 April 2017](#).