

August 19, 2020

The Continental Defence Debate in the Canadian Public Sphere – Evidence from Traditional Media and Parliamentary Committees

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The Canada-US relationship has been front and center of the public policy conversation for decades. The military dimension of this cooperation has generated its fair share of debates and controversies from the deployment of Bomarc missiles to the Canadian participation in the U.S. anti-ballistic missile system. With emerging calls to modernize NORAD, it is important to take stock of the nature of the public discussion on continental defence in Canada so as to sketch out the level of interest it generates, and identify possible solutions to refresh key institutions and infrastructures such as NORAD and the North Warning System (NWS).

This report provides empirical evidence to document the nature and intensity of the public discussion on continental defence. The immediate focus is on mapping how this conversation evolved during the past ten years. We do so by focusing on two forums involving different types of participants. First, we will gather media coverage from Canadian newspapers, mainly by dissecting editorials published in these outlets. These editorials, whether written by a member of the newspaper's editorial team or an external expert, are opinion texts advocating for specific solutions and engaged in convincing their audiences. These texts are typically written with the intent of addressing a large audience; they tackle public interest issues as well as debates, but generally

do not delve deep into issues or possess the same level of technical complexity than other assessments (such as parliamentary committees). Opinion pages act as a forum where different actors (academics, former bureaucrats, civil society leaders, elected representatives) put their worldviews forward and offer recommendations. However, this is not a flawlessly inclusive forum; there exists a filtering mechanism in which each newspaper's editorial team decides who will be published and which expert may or may not voice their opinions in their pages.

Second, we analyze the opinions expressed by different stakeholders and participants in Canadian parliamentary committees. The experts called upon to testify are of different backgrounds, akin to the editorial pages, and reflect the interests of the governing party on specific policy issues. At the same time, the analysis of contributions submitted by participants of the committees can provide information on the ideas to which elected representatives are exposed. The target audience differs in this case, as experts testify in front of Members of Parliament (MPs) and parliamentarians are usually better informed on issues than the general populace. Hence, experts will typically provide more detailed and technical security assessments.

Opinion texts and parliamentary committees

The terms "NORAD" and "North Warning System" constituted the focal points of the analysis across these two forums. The material we have chosen for the analysis of traditional media is newspapers. Using the Canadian Major Dailies database, 11 newspapers were scrutinized for journalistic articles¹, from different regions of the country and in both official languages.

Parliamentary committees' transcripts were accessed through Hansard. Contributions of all participants across different committees were gathered for the 41st Parliament (from 2 June 2011 to 2 August 2015) and the 42nd Parliament (from 3 December 2015 to 11 September 2019).

The first point of interest lies in the mapping of the fluctuations and patterns documenting the level of interest for continental defence in the Canadian public sphere.

Measuring the noise

The level of interest for continental defence fluctuated through time. Newspapers coverage peaked between 2001 and 2005, as shown in figure 1.

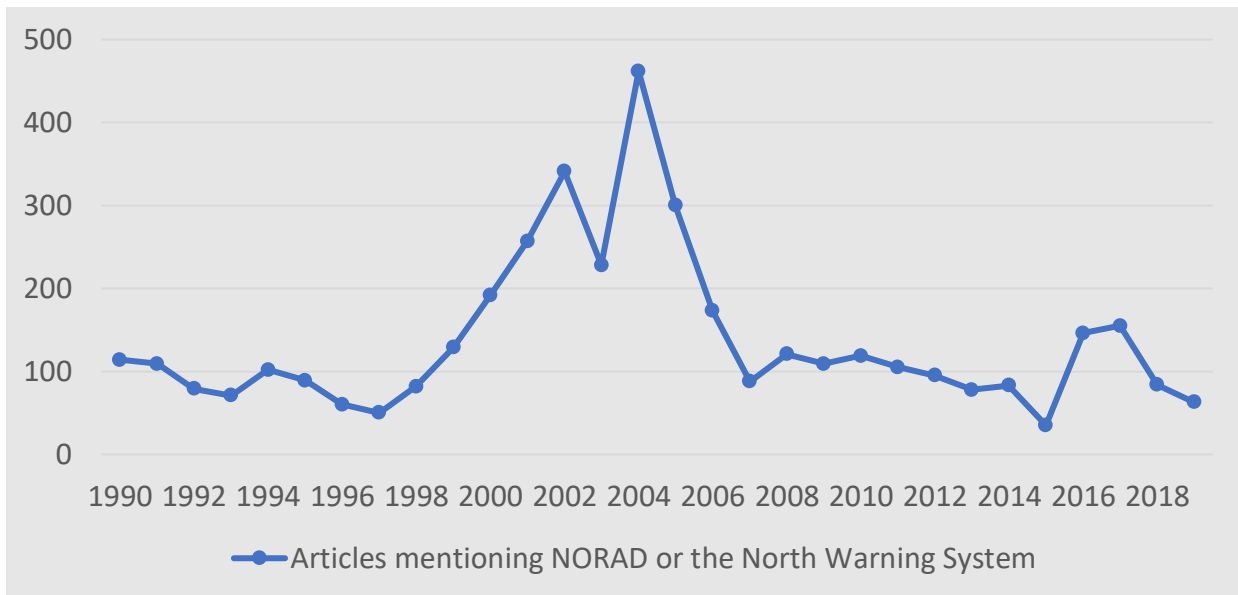


Figure 1: Number of articles mentioning NORAD or the North Warning System published in 11 newspapers in Canada

However, the level of interest remained relatively low during the 1990s and subsided quickly after 2006. An analysis of Canada’s newspaper of record, the *Globe and Mail*, generates insights as to the low level of controversy of continental defence. For example, the renewals of NORAD (April 1991, March 1996, June 2000, and May 2006) did not generate intense coverage; an average of only six articles alluding to these events were published. The 2000 renewal was the most salient of the two, as interest was mostly linked to the possible Canadian participation in the U.S. anti-ballistic missile program. Past this governmental decision on the U.S. program (early 2005), the 2006 renewal was centered on the domestic debates and political divisions in a minority government. The fact that Conservatives and Liberals agreed on extending NORAD to maritime surveillance contributed in keeping the coverage contained. The decision to renew the accord in perpetuity cannot justify the low level of attention as past renewals did not generate substantial media interest. External developments are responsible for most of the attention devoted to continental defence from 2000 to 2020, especially when the U.S. proposal offered a reversal of traditional Canadian positions or ran against long-established Canadian beliefs (see below).

Most of these mentions concerned NORAD (mentioned in 3520 journalistic articles) rather than the NWS: the latter occupied a marginal position in media coverage (173 mentions). This proved to be a dominant observation in newspapers and parliamentary committees: the NWS was seldom mentioned in comparison to NORAD. This is likely to impact the level of information that Canadians have about this system.

A similar pattern was observed with editorials. The number of editorials published offer an indicator as far as issue saliency is concerned. Opinion texts typically focus on highly-salient issues, deemed to address questions of significant public interest. The evolution in the number of editorials published from 2000 to 2019 mentioning NORAD or the NWS mirrors the level of interest observed in journalistic articles (see figure 2).

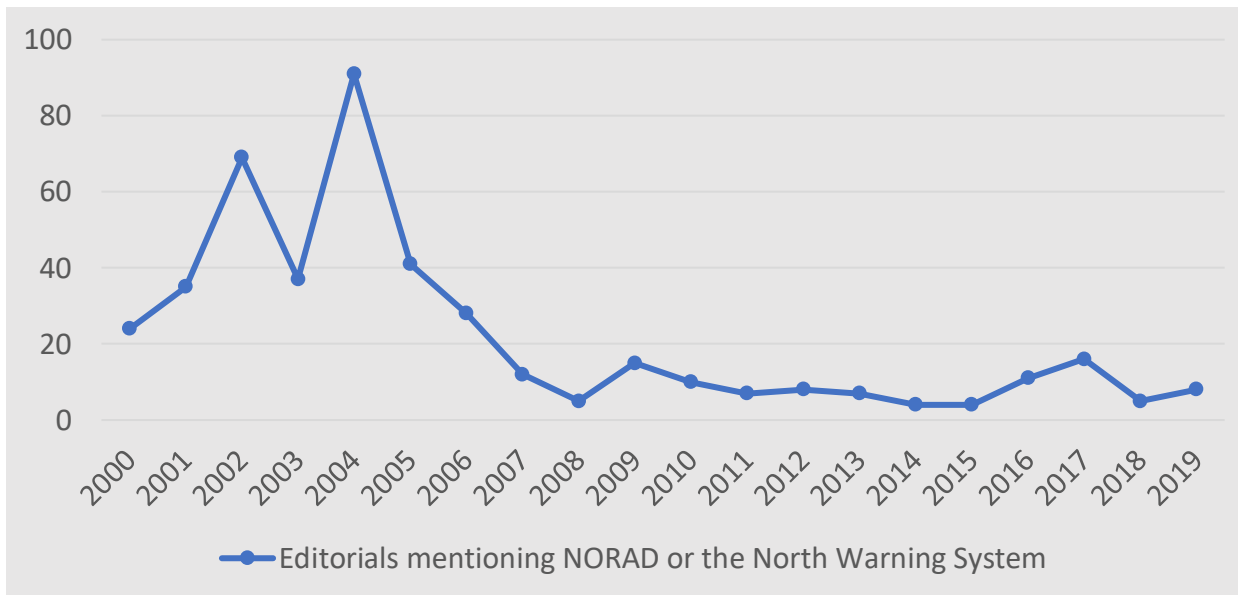


Figure 2: Number of editorials mentioning NORAD or the North Warning System published in 14 newspapers in Canada

Again, the debates surrounding the Canadian participation in the U.S. anti-ballistic missile system and the defence of the North American airspace following the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 monopolized attention between 2001 and 2005. The purchase of F-35 fighter jets did not generate the same feedback in the early 2010s, with editorialist attention turned to NORAD dwindling until a slight (momentary) increase in 2017. The 2017 bump was due to comments by top Canadian military officials who had stated that the U.S. would not necessarily defend Canada in case of a ballistic missile attack (at the time, the likely aggressor was identified as North Korean). The highly volatile international environment, the shouting match between the North Korean regime and the U.S. administration, and the escalation logic prevailing in the fall of 2017 contributed to elevating this story. North Korean ballistic tests embodied a credible threat and experts believed that North Korea possessed the necessary technology to reach the North American continent, which highlighted the seriousness of this news item for the Canadian press. The two instances that generated a high volume of media production were linked to the threat of incoming ballistic missiles. Other developing stories did not generate as much attention. For example, NORAD or the NWS did not occupy the limelight when Russian military aircrafts were identified near Canadian airspace in the early 2010s. The cooperation (or lack thereof) with the United States was perceived as a more compelling story, raising fundamental policy questions in terms of connecting with public interest.

National debates on continental defence tended to generate opinion texts from a wider diversity of outlets. As can be deduced from table 1, newspapers with different editorial lines (right-wing, center, left-wing) expressed opinions during the 2000-2010 time period (and the BMD debate more specifically).

	Number of opinion texts (2000-2009)	Number of opinion texts (2010-2019)
<i>National Post</i>	43 (12%)	45 (47%)
<i>Toronto Star</i>	52 (15%)	10 (11%)
<i>Globe and Mail</i>	93 (26%)	11 (12%)
Other English newspapers, Western Canada (<i>Edmonton Journal, Calgary Herald, Vancouver Sun, The Province</i>)	61 (17%)	8 (8%)
Other English newspapers, Eastern Canada (<i>Montreal Gazette, Ottawa Citizen</i>)	49 (14%)	7 (7%)
French newspapers (<i>Le Devoir, La Presse</i>)	55 (16%)	14 (15%)
Total	355 (100%)	95 (100%)

Table 1: number of opinion texts published in different newspapers from 2000 to 2019.

On the other hand, newspapers with a right-wing editorial line (such as the *National Post*) represented the main source of opinion texts during calmer time periods. They were also the only sources actively pressing Canada to join the U.S. BMD system as North Korean nuclear capabilities were showcased in 2017 (all in-house opinion texts).

On the other hand, media coverage did not correspond with the level of attention devoted to issues by political elites: these fluctuations in media interest did not correlate with the amount of time dedicated to continental defence issues by elected representatives. NORAD and the NWS were abundantly discussed during the 41st Parliament, which marked the first majority Conservative government led by Prime Minister Stephen Harper. This phenomenon continued, although at a lower intensity, during the 42nd Parliament even though a different party formed government (see table 2).

	Number of interventions mentioning NORAD or the NWS	Average number of interventions per sitting days ²
42nd parliament (3 December 2015 – 11 September 2019)	713 mentions	1.6
41st Parliament (2 June 2011 – 2 August 2015)	1679 mentions	3.3
40th Parliament (18 November 2008 – 26 March 2011)	271 mentions	0.9
39th Parliament (3 April 2006 – 7 September 2008)	71 mentions	0.2
38th Parliament (4 October 2004 – 29 November 2005)	154 mentions	1
37th Parliament (29 January 2001 – 23 May 2004)	282 mentions	0.67

Table 2: number of interventions mentioning NORAD or the NWS on parliamentary committees from 2001 to 2019.

The attention in parliamentary committees peaked at a time when media coverage on continental defence was minimal. Attention in media coverage and committees were at polar opposites in the early 2000s. The anti-ballistic missile system dossier was tackled at the executive level as Prime Ministers Jean Chrétien and Paul Martin decided to take the lead on this sensitive and divisive issue. As such, committees did not insist much on soliciting expert or external inputs to enlighten the decision-making process.

Opinion texts and parliamentary committees helped give a voice to certain groups but not others – an observation of particular interest in light of the current government’s emphasis on consultations with diverse groups. Opinion texts were written by authors from diverse backgrounds (civil society, academia, governmental officials, etc.) but not balanced gender representation (see table 3).

	Opinion texts – Male authors	Opinion texts – Female authors	Total
In-house contributor	17	9	26
Academic contributor	20	3	23
Civil society contributor	12	2	14
Bureaucrat or military official contributor	12	0	12
Politician contributor	5	0	5
Business representative contributor	1	0	1
Total	67	14	81

Table 3: opinion texts’ authors by background and gender.

In terms of gender representation, parliamentary committees did not fare much better. Only 10% of the experts called to testify during the 41st Parliament were women. This figure more than doubled during the 42nd Parliament (24%), which, although still a low figure, constitutes an improvement. Discussions tended to be monopolized by academics and military officials: both categories of participants constituted 65% of all external experts during the 41st Parliament and 60% during the 42nd Parliament. There was a tendency during the 42nd Parliament to give more space to academic and bureaucratic voices while military officials were not called upon as frequently (see table 4).

	41 st Parliament	42 nd Parliament
Military official	12 (39%)	19 (25%)
Academic	8 (26%)	27 (35%)
Civil society	5 (16%)	10 (13%)
Bureaucrat	3 (10%)	16 (21%)
Business representative	3 (10%)	4 (5%)
Other	0 (0%)	1 (1%)

Table 4: participants on parliamentary committees based on background.

Consultations on a new defence policy statement can explain this reality: academic participants were often solicited on committees before the launch of the defence policy (*Strong, Secured, Engaged* or SSE) in early June 2017. After the publication of the defence policy, academic participation reverted back to the level observed during the 41st Parliament (at around 27% for the post-SSE period).

Agenda-setting: flashpoints in continental defence

Specific debates and issues related to continental defence were coded and analyzed manually for opinion texts as these documents were short and limited in numbers. Two debates dominated discussions on continental defence in the opinion section of newspapers: the Canadian participation to the U.S ballistic missile defence system (BMD) and the military procurement process in Canada. These two matters accounted for 40% of all editorials mentioning NORAD or the North Warning System from 2010 to May 2020. The broader Canada-U.S. relationship (with special focus on NAFTA renegotiation, NATO burden-sharing and Trump's foreign policy) was the primary focus of approximately 20% of opinion texts.

Attention to the BMD issue occurred at a specific time and was caused by external, punctual developments (mostly North Korean ballistic testing). In fact, 70% of BMD mentions occurred from 23 April to 3 May 2013 and from 13 July to 26 September 2017. The reaction of Canadian commentators on North Korean ballistic testing was significant, but also short-lived. Interest in BMD did not last past these developments and was observed only in newspapers with right-wing editorial lines (mostly the *National Post*): it did not materialize into a debate of national magnitude.

Reflections on the Canada-U.S. relationship were also time-specific. The elections of Donald Trump spurred debates on the evolution of bilateral ties and on how Canada should position itself in a time of great power competition. However, NORAD was often cited in passing and was not the primary focus of opinion texts. The organization was cited as an example of the strong bonds uniting both countries.

On the other hand, the military procurement process, especially the renewal of the fighter jet fleet, monopolized attention from 2010-2020. Internal factors can explain this sustained interest: about 1/3 of texts centering on this issue were published before the election of Justin Trudeau in October 2015, all addressing the decision to purchase a fleet of F-35 aircraft. The Trudeau Government's decision to re-examine options to replace the aging CF-18 also elicited most of the editorials published after 2015.

We also examined the contemporary discourse on continental defence by analyzing transcripts of parliamentary committee meetings in which NORAD is discussed. To capture the richness of the discussion, these discursive resources were analyzed using a quantitative and automated approach because they were lengthier and more numerous. Hansard releases transcripts of all committee meetings at the level of individual speeches by committee members and guests, and also records meta-data on the date of the speech, the precise time a speech begins, and the party affiliation of the speaker (if a parliamentarian). A "speech" may be a prolonged, uninterrupted testimony, a question from a committee member, or even words of welcome. We downloaded all speeches from the 41st and 42nd parliaments where the keyword "NORAD" occurred at least once in the

speeches comprising the committee’s testimony for that day. A snippet of the resulting dataset is pictured below. The variable “text_original” is a string of alphanumeric characters, the content of which is our object of interest. Hereafter, we refer to each of these strings of text as a “string”.

3.	lastname Braun	constituency	caucus	date 2014-05-08	time 12:27:50
text_original Prof. Aurel Braun: (1225)[English]Thank you, Mr. Chisu.It's an import..					
4.	lastname Opitz	constituency Etobicoke Centre	caucus CPC	date 2014-05-08	time 13:01:23
text_original Mr. Ted Opitz: (1300)[English]Right, okay, I thought you said five mi..					

Table 5: Parliamentary committee transcript dataset (selection)

Because we were interested in analyzing the content of strings which occur as part of a substantive discussion of NORAD, we filtered out strings which contain only incidental references to NORAD.³ The resulting dataset on which we perform our analysis contains 1,386 strings.

We were interested in what topics comprise the NORAD discourse in parliamentary committees and in how the distribution of these issues has changed over time. In principle, this task could be accomplished by human coders who prespecify a list of likely topics based on subject expertise. However, it would be valuable to be able to uncover “latent” topics which were not among those prespecified but which emerge on careful reading of the transcripts. Performing this re-coding in an iterative fashion quickly becomes impossible for human coders, and inevitably has an *ad hoc* quality. We would also be concerned about inter-coder reliability.

We therefore adopt a data-driven approach to the assignment of our strings to topics which are not prespecified, thereby letting the data speak for themselves. Our methodology applies a form of structural topic modeling known as Latent Dirichlet Allocation (LDA) which identifies latent topics in a corpus of texts. The method is based on the premise that authors tend to use similar words when they talk about the same topic. This means that the high degree of co-occurrence of words across two texts implies a high probability that the texts are discussing the same topic. To implement LDA, the researcher defines a number of topics to which each text will be allocated with a given probability. The LDA algorithm first breaks each text into individual words, randomly assigning words to one of the topics. It then resamples the texts, updating the assignment of a word to a topic on the basis of the topic assignment of all other words. The algorithm reports the most likely distribution of strings across topics, identifies the individual words most predictive of allocation to each topic, and for each topic identifies the strings assigned to that topic with the highest likelihood. Researchers experiment with the

number of topics (the default is 10 in most statistical packages) to arrive at a number at which the emergent topics are most easily interpretable, being both meaningful and mutually exclusive.⁴

Consider as an intuitive example an attempt to identify latent topics in a corpus of newspaper articles. Words like “game, goal, victory, standings” may be found to co-occur, and texts containing these words will be allocated with high probability to the same latent topic, which the researcher, on the basis of subject knowledge, would recognize as “sports.”⁵ LDA would in effect recover the section headings of the newspaper. The value of LDA, of course, is in applications such as ours, where it reports topics which are latent in that they are not prespecified, but are nevertheless interpretable by human researchers. LDA is therefore a valuable tool in any exploration of the discourses present in a large corpus of texts.

The 10-topic model returns the most informative topics in our case. These are the topics which the LDA algorithm identifies as arising in committee discussions of NORAD are displayed in table 6.

Topic	Average likelihood string is assigned to topic
Service interoperability	0.115
Ballistic missile defence	0.113
Thanks, politesse (not included in subsequent graphs)	0.111
Aircraft readiness	0.109
Partnership with U.S.; warning systems; core mission	0.105
Cybersecurity/terrorism	0.102
Arctic issues	0.09
Introductions (not included in subsequent graphs)	0.089
Drones as means of observation	0.083
Russia/China issues, i.e., international relations	0.082

Table 6: LDA topics derived from 10-topic mode, with average topic share.

We found two broad categories of topics emerging. On the one hand, cybersecurity, Arctic issues, and Russia/China issues refer to specific threats and areas of action. On the other hand, attention was also given to addressing pragmatic areas of cooperation with the U.S. partner. In this regard, mentions of capabilities (aircraft, warning system, drone, ballistic missile defence) were noted as salient elements of debates.

The full dataset of strings, when the LDA algorithm is told to cluster strings based on 10 topics, assumes as an initial baseline that the topics are equally probable. Therefore, the average topic shares in a 10-topic model will be pulled toward 0.1. That said, we still saw differences in the share of attention devoted to each topic, as shown in the second column of table 5. If we conceive of attention in terms of the average likelihood a string belongs to each topic, the most common topic – service interoperability – received about 30% more attention than the least common topic – Russia/China issues.

We also compared the mean probability of being assigned to a topic across two sessions of parliament. Figure 3 shows the change across the 41st and 42nd parliaments in the average likelihood of a string being allocated to our topics. The data show that ballistic missile defence, cybersecurity, aircraft readiness, and the relationship with the U.S. have received a higher share of attention in the 42nd Parliament. Russia/China issues, drones, the Arctic and service interoperability have received a decreased share of the attention.

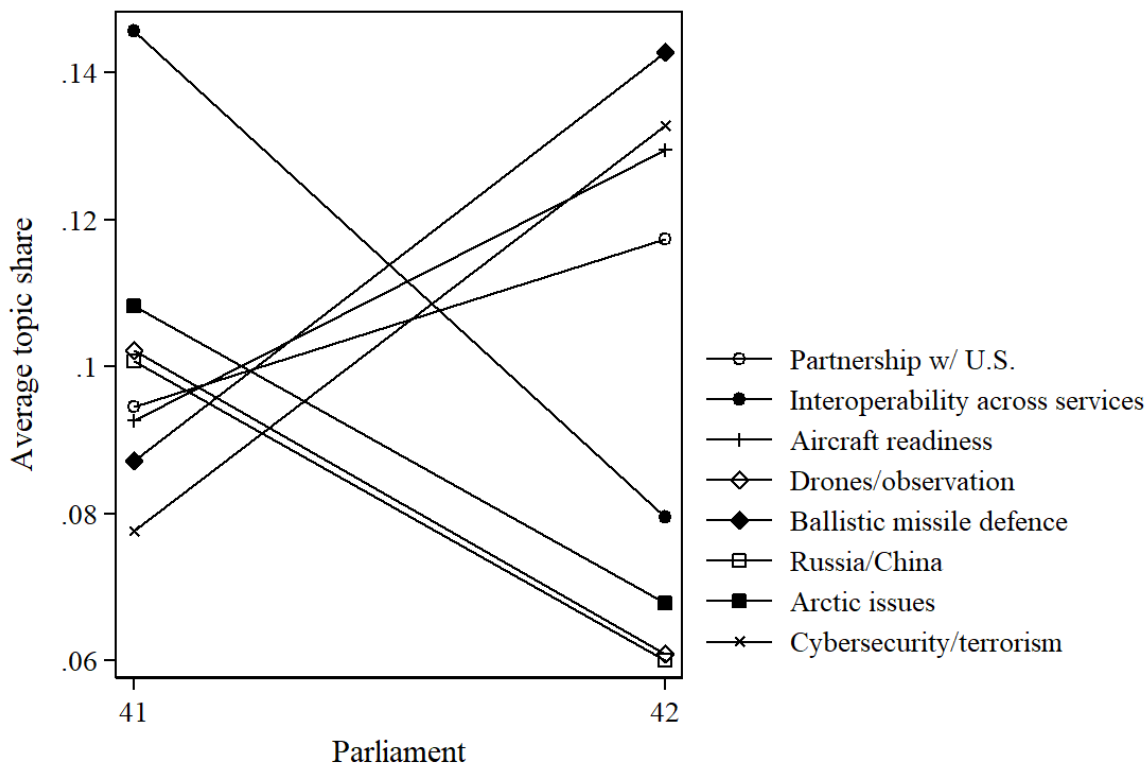


Figure 3: Average topic share across two parliaments.

Topics addressed on parliamentary committees mirrored the ones raised in editorials. North Korean ballistic testing and the election of Donald Trump caused the ballistic defence system and the partnership with the U.S. to be central themes of discussion from 2015-19. A focus on procurements and capabilities was also observed throughout the period studied. If drones were more discussed from 2011-15, aircraft readiness took the relay afterwards.

The nature of the debate

The nature of the continental defence debate can be broken down into two categories: the nature of threats perceived and the positions on how to modernize continental defence.

Proponents of the debate on continental defence typically present a threat assessment before putting forward solutions or recommendations. Authors of opinion texts merged on four main threats: China, Russia, rogue states such as Iran and North Korea and non-state actors. Notable variations during this time period must be underlined. For example, perceptions of Russia substantially changed after the 2014 Ukrainian crisis. If commentators downplayed the Russian threat before 2014, this sentiment disappeared after 2014 with all 12 mentions of Russia positing the country as a significant threat to Canada. A rising China began to appear in these threat assessments at about the same time, with all mentions occurring after 2015. The narrative of an emerging great power competition constituted the dominant frame, with 80% of all mentions of the Chinese threat coming from one newspaper (*National Post*).

By far, rogue states such as Iran and North Korea were the most often enumerated threats when describing the international security environment. A shift in trend was observed as the decade progressed: non-state threats (such as terrorists for example) were replaced by nations working towards developing a nuclear weapons program in security assessments.

Examination of strings obtained from transcripts of Parliamentary Committees relevant to this analysis revealed similarities and one marked difference in threat assessments made by external speakers between the 41st and 42nd Parliaments. At the 41st Parliamentary Committees, the most notable threats included Russia, mainly because of the development of its offensive capabilities including those related to its posture about the Arctic and its cooperation therein with China, as well as North Korea and Iran mostly due to their efforts for acquiring or developing ballistic missile capabilities capable of reaching North America and the volatility of their respective intentions. Although non-state actors (e.g. terrorists) were the least explicitly identified threats, references to non-specific military (e.g. proliferation of weapons of mass destruction) or to non-military threats (e.g. human security risks) were more frequent. These references could be construed as encompassing non-state actors writ large. If this was in fact the case, the salience of threats from non-state actors may have been understated during the speakers' interventions.

Whereas China was seldom specifically identified as a threat for North American continental defence in the 41st Parliaments' Committees, it consistently ranked among the top 2 threats across all categories of speakers (e.g. academics; military officers; representatives of civil society; etc.) in the 42nd Parliamentary Committees. In total, China or Russia were framed as threats 36 times during the 42nd parliament; such mentions occurred only 14 times during the 41st Parliament. This change may have coincided with an increasingly confident Chinese regime both in rhetoric and action. In the same vein, there was high consistency among speakers with respect to Russia which this time topped the threat assessment overall, indicating a stronger acknowledgment of its capabilities and intent compared to the 41st Parliamentary Committees. Russia's increased activity in the Arctic, in or near the Canadian Air Defence Identification Zone, and the development of its offensive capabilities are likely to have contributed to the widespread perception of its future behaviour as threatening. Furthermore, agreement was also reached on the third position of the rogue states North Korea and Iran, which were followed by non-state actors. Explicit mentions of terrorism were more numerous during the 42nd Parliament.

The respective threats assessment between the 41st and 42nd federal governments did not differ significantly from each other but appeared to evolve to reflect the rapid changes occurring in the international security environment. Evidence is pointing in the direction of highly consensual positions by experts called to testify on the nature of threats looming over continental defence.

Calls to change NORAD or continental defence constituted the exception rather than the norm in opinion texts. Indeed, continental defence institutions were perceived as non-problematic and consensual initiatives and were brandished as stellar achievements birthed by the productive and positive Canada/U.S. bilateral relation. As key continental arrangements such as NAFTA were contested by the Trump administration, the continental defence partnership was presented in a favourable light stressing the long-established cooperation between the two nations. In total, 73% of opinion texts favored the status quo, not asking for any change to NORAD. Among commentators recommending changes, only two texts called on the Government of Canada to operate a break to the defence partnership and downsize Canada’s involvement in NORAD (see table 7).

	Opinion texts	Parliamentary committees
Interventions for status quo	61 (73%)	42 (59%)
Interventions for downsizing continental defence	2 (2%)	0 (0%)
Interventions for strengthening/expanding continental defence	21 (25%)	29(41%)

Table 7: opinion texts and parliamentary committees’ experts on reforming continental defence.

Experts on parliamentary committees expressed similar opinions, although more contributors sided with expanding continental defence arrangements. It is interesting to link these positions on change with the expert’s threat assessment.

For the most part, a majority of military officials did not recommend changes. As for military officials who did issue recommendations, suggestions were mainly centred on increasing capabilities to meet emerging threats: surveillance equipment, the modernization of the North Warning System and aircrafts were all issues raised by these individuals.

The necessity of modernizing and expanding continental defence was expressed in various ways by commentators in opinion texts. For the most part, these interventions stressed that the future of continental defence rests on an expansion of NORAD’s mandate and responsibilities. Approximately 75% of opinion texts calling for strengthening continental defence argued that NORAD should be expanded to new domains. Participation in the U.S anti-ballistic missile system was the most often cited suggestion with 12 mentions, with 75% of these mentions published in the *National Post* alone. These calls were spurred on by new North Korean ballistic tests in 2013 and 2017. Maritime surveillance and cybersecurity functions (2 mentions each) were punctually raised as potential mandates.

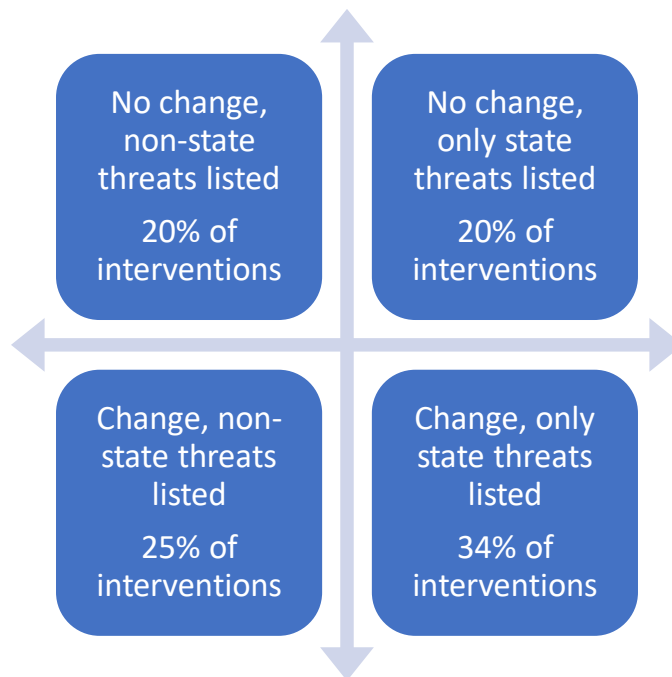


Figure 4: distribution of threat assessment and suggestions by experts testifying on parliamentary committees during the 41st and 42nd Parliaments.

The reasons cited to expand or reinvest in continental defence infrastructures varied. For example, Colin Robertson framed the modernization and subsequent investments in the North Warning System (NWS) as an “opportunity [for us] to lead in the development of innovative space and underwater applications that would buttress our Arctic sovereignty.” He went on to state that we could “take inspiration from HMCS *Harry DeWolf*, the first of our offshore patrol ships.”⁶ Perceived benefits to Canadian Arctic sovereignty and security were expressed by other commentators. *National Post* columnist Diane Francis claimed that maritime extension to the continental defence partnership would “eliminate Arctic territorial disputes and secure the coastlines Canada’s navy is too small to patrol.”⁷ Nothing is said on this last claim about the current roadblocks and disagreements between the two countries as far as Arctic waterways are concerned, especially the Northwest Passage. The expansion to the cyber or space domains were justified by a diverse set of explanations, ranging from defending the Canadian North⁸ to reacting to a world of expanding threats⁹ or adjusting to 21st century war-fighting requirements.¹⁰

Similar argumentations were developed in support to Canada’s participation to the U.S. anti-ballistic missile system. For Daniel Lang and Roméo Dallaire, Canada could contribute technologically to the system development. They also argued that this involvement would make Canada join other NATO allies favourable to the U.S. initiative.¹¹ For them and the *National Post* editorial board, the protection provided by the system and the capacity to be present at the decision-making table counter-balanced the perceived infringement on Canadian sovereignty. As the *National Post* contended in an in-house editorial, “Canadian sovereignty isn’t enhanced by refusing to be part of the process that protects us from attack.”¹²

The deep integration of North American defence relations through NORAD was posited as the main justification to agree to participate in the U.S. project. As the two nations were already well integrated, missile defence was casted as a logical continuation of this partnership: “bringing Canada officially into the loop would give us a seat at the table and cost us little in return, while eliminating a bizarre flaw in the otherwise seamless integration of North American defences.”¹³ In all of these texts, commentators were quick to point out that Canadian contribution to the overall project would be minimal and that many opportunities existed for Canada to play a role in the initiative. These arguments meant to address possible rebuttals or public weariness concerning costs, loss of sovereignty, and the warfare/militarization nature of the system (especially about militarizing outer space and renouncing Canada’s traditional policy in regard to the peaceful use of outer space).

The interventions on parliamentary committees were lengthier, and the degree of subtlety and complexity in the solutions formulated was greater. However, the nature of change advocated was strikingly similar. By far, Canadian participation to U.S. anti-ballistic missile system was the most often relayed recommendation, with these calls growing during the 42nd Parliament and facing little opposition (one expert was opposed while 15 were in favour). Other ideas of expansion were vocalized as well, contrary to opinion texts that rarely addressed the idea of expanding the mandate of the organisation. Furthermore, calls for expansions often came hand-in-hand with improvements of capabilities. For example, an expansion of cyber and space capabilities was mentioned respectively 4 and 2 times: these suggestions centered around exploring new terrains and figuring out if NORAD could take on such roles. Three interventions specifically called on expanding the maritime awareness mandate of NORAD.

Suggestions to join the U.S. anti-ballistic missile system consisted of calls to fill a gap in the Canada/U.S. relationship, given that a non-participation could potentially put the remainder of the relationship at risk, positioning Canada as a free-rider. This was reflected in Lieutenant-General (ret.) George Macdonald’s statement:

We subscribe to the necessity of the alliance to defend North America and yet we have abrogated our responsibility to the partnership with regard to the BMD mission. We have left it to the American side of NORAD to perform using their territory, their resources, and their rules. With improvements to the BMD system over the years there's a real risk that NORAD involvement will be marginalized to the point where the U.S. will want to consider excluding NORAD from missile warning altogether and simply execute both the warning and the defence mission themselves.¹⁴

Former Minister of National Defence Bill Graham relayed a similar concern when he stated that “without participating in ballistic missile defence, we are not guaranteeing the future of NORAD as such.”¹⁵

In terms of the expansion of the maritime mandate or adding a cyber-defence component to the continental defence agreement, opinions were mixed and suggestions more hesitant. The extension of the maritime responsibility would seem to flow naturally from the maritime warning component into a possible maritime control responsibility, although this shift would “require a rethink of Canada’s naval command and control structures” according to continental defence expert Andrea Charron.¹⁶ The case of adding a cyber-defence

mandate was articulated in a more complex fashion, and did not meet any consensual positions. For military officials such as Lieutenant-General Alain J. Parent or Rear Admiral Scott Bishop, cyber defence is a future warfare domain that will only become more salient: cooperation with the U.S. cyber command is already in place and future responsibilities on this dimension would sit well with NORAD instead of creating a new agency¹⁷.

Academic experts were more hesitant on the matter, with Christopher Sands casting NORAD as a follower rather than a leader on this front, or Charles Doran stressing that NORAD was “not going to be a place to innovate with this technology.”¹⁸ For her part, Elinor Sloan encouraged the committee to investigate into potential bilateral cooperation on cyber-defence of critical infrastructures, which represented a broad call to open the conversation on the matter.¹⁹

On this note, military officials were keen to position themselves as ideally situated to take on a promising security area of involvement while more neutral observers drew a more sober picture of NORAD capabilities. All in all, interventions on parliamentary committees mainly supported an incremental process of modernization, one that would add a control element to missile and maritime warning mandates rather than develop new areas of responsibilities (such as cyber defence).

Conclusion

Our data of traditional media and parliamentary committees’ attention to continental defence documents a few key insights. First, the North Warning System was seldom mentioned in traditional media. As a result, Canadians are not well informed about the radar system and its role in continental defence: this could make it more difficult for the Canadian government to justify significant investments in its modernization. NORAD, for its part, was more frequently mentioned, although mentions reached a peak with the debate around the Canadian participation to the U.S. anti-ballistic missile system (ABM) in the early 2000s. The 2006 perpetuity renewal also marked a decrease in media attention. As such, the perpetuity renewal served its purpose and allowed public controversies about the institution to be neutralized. NORAD, for the most part, was and is still brandished as a stellar accomplishment of the bilateral relationship, especially since 2016 as the Canada/U.S. was tested by NAFTA renegotiations.

Second, Canadian participation in the U.S. ABM system continued to dominate the continental defence discussion even after Canada’s 2005 refusal to join the system. Commentators, both in opinion texts and on parliamentary committees, devoted substantial attention to the issue. This push in opinion texts was concentrated in newspapers with a right-wing editorial line and more specifically in the *National Post*. This observation is not surprising when we consider that right-wing voters are more supportive of additional defence spending.²⁰ Almost unanimous support for Canadian participation in the ABM system was also detected in opinion texts and on parliamentary committees. This level of support from commentators and experts alike will have to be reconciled with the public’s reluctance to oppose such involvement.²¹ Hence, we are presented with a divide between experts and public opinion which is likely to be exposed if further public consultations are held on this matter.

Finally, the importance given to ABM participation has eclipsed other possible vectors of modernization. Scenarios of expanding NORAD to other jurisdictions (Greenland, Mexico) were not addressed substantially. The option of extending continental defence to other domains (maritime control or cyber defence for example) was scarcely mentioned in opinion texts and on parliamentary committees.

It is important to conclude by reiterating that opinion texts and parliamentary committees are not representative of the high degree of diversity present in Canadian society. Although parliamentary committees during the 42nd Parliament heard more testimonies from female experts and participants from diverse backgrounds, the continental defence debate was, and still is, dominated by an elite with privileged access to positions of power. Public consultations must broaden participation to better represent societal preferences regarding the future of continental defence in Canada.

Notes

- 1 The list comprises the following newspapers: *Calgary Herald*, *Edmonton Journal*, *Globe and Mail*, *La Presse*, *Le Devoir*, *Montreal Gazette*, *National Post*, *Ottawa Citizen*, *The Province*, *Toronto Star* and the *Vancouver Sun*.
- 2 Of course, the number of sitting days is not the same across Parliaments, justifying this indicator. This measure was the result of a simple calculation: the number of mentions divided by the number of sitting days for each Parliament.
- 3 This is done by dropping strings which occur on a date in which only one reference to “NORAD” occurred. This removes 17% of the originally downloaded strings.
- 4 The authoritative originating source for LDA is David Blei, Andrew Ng and Michael Jordan. Latent Dirichlet Allocation. *Journal of Machine Learning Research*, volume 3 (2003): 993-1022. Our analysis is completed in Stata using the LDA command developed in Carlo Schwarz. Idagibbs: A command for topic modeling in Stata using latent Dirichlet Allocation. *The State Journal*, vol. 18., no. 1 (2018): 101-117.
- 5 Likewise, words like “merger, stock, earnings, corporate” may be found to co-occur, and texts containing these words will likewise be allocated to the same latent topic, which we might identify as “business”.
- 6 Colin Robertson. Boosting our security spending will pay off. *Globe and Mail*, November 28 2019, B4.
- 7 Diane Francis. Three amigos may split, but bromance will go on; Trajectory clear for Canada-U.S. relationship. *National Post*, October 23 2017, FP3.
- 8 Paul Chapin, Jack Granatstein, Don McNamara, and Hugh Segal. A roadmap to a stronger military. *National Post*, September 28 2015, A11.
- 9 Laura Dawson. Why Canada should join Team America. *Globe and Mail*, November 23 2018, A13.
- 10 Toronto Star. Job number 1: to inspire trust. *Toronto Star*, August 29 2012, A16.
- 11 Daniel Lang and Roméo Dallaire. A second chance to make the right choice. *National Post*, June 23 2014, A8.
- 12 National Post. Missile defence: Better late than never. *National Post*, April 23 2013, A10.
- 13 National Post. A Canadian role in ballistic missile defence. *National Post*, April 19 2016, A8.
- 14 [George Macdonald. Intervention on the National Defence Parliamentary Committee.](#) October 30 2014.
- 15 [Bill Graham. Intervention on the National Defence Parliamentary Committee.](#) February 27 2018.
- 16 [Andrea Charron. Intervention on National Defence Parliamentary Committee.](#) November 1 2016.
- 17 Scott Bishop. Intervention on the National Defence Parliamentary Committee. March 22 2016, retrieved from <https://www.ourcommons.ca/PublicationSearch/en/?PubType=40017>; Alain J. Parent. Intervention on National Defence Parliamentary Committee. March 9 2015, retrieved from <https://www.ourcommons.ca/PublicationSearch/en/?PubType=40017>
- 18 [Christopher Sands. Intervention on National Defence Parliamentary Committee.](#) December 4 2014; [Charles Doran. Intervention on National Defence Parliamentary Committee.](#) March 9 2015.
- 19 [Elinor Sloan. Intervention on National Defence Parliamentary Committee.](#) March 25 2014.

²⁰ Mathieu Landriault and Praneel Gayan. [Canadian public opinion and defence spending – Possible implications for continental defence modernization](#). NAADSN Quick Impact Statement, July 2 2020.

²¹ Angus Reid Institute. [Fear of nuclear war rising significantly, but more Canadians inclined to “stay out” of missile defence](#). October 17 2017.