

AUGUST 30, 2021

The Permanent Joint Board on Defence: Foundational to “Limbo” to a Renewed Purpose?

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Purpose

The purpose of this Policy Brief is to reflect on the status of the U.S.-Canada Permanent Joint Board on Defence (PJBD) in this complex continental threat environment on its 81st anniversary.

Background

In 1938, as a crisis brewed in the Sudetenland, U.S., President Franklin Delano Roosevelt made a remarkable pledge while receiving an honorary degree at Queen’s University in Kingston, Ontario; the United States would “not stand idly by” if Canada was to be attacked by a great power adversary.¹ Caught off guard, Canadian Prime Minister William Lyon Mackenzie King responded with the following:

“We, too, have our obligations as a good and friendly neighbour, and one of them is to see that, at our instance, our country is made as immune from attack or possible invasion as we can reasonably be expected to make it, and that should

the occasion ever arise, enemy forces should not be able to pursue their way, either by land, sea or air to the United States across Canadian territory.”²

These statements, colloquially known as the “Kingston Dispensation” and the “Canadian Corollary,” led to the more expansive, yet still informal, Ogdensburg Agreement, two years later. While campaigning for the presidency in Canton, New York, and during the height of the Battle of Britain, Roosevelt asked King to join him on his train to discuss “the matter of mutual defences of our coasts on the Atlantic.”³ On 18 August 1940, as a result of a joint press release between Roosevelt and King, the Permanent Joint Board on Defence (or the PJBD) was immediately stood up.

The joint press release, and Roosevelt’s and King’s prior statements, are the underlying foundation of the Canada-U.S. defence relationship — with an interesting conundrum. Formally, the two heads of government are declaring a mutual defence alliance, but it is largely informal in the sense that this agreement never received Congressional nor

* This Policy Primer was adapted from a presentation in the NORAD Modernization and Continental Defence breakout room of the 2nd NAADSN Student Summer Seminar on 23 July 2021.

Parliamentary approval. Immediately, the PJBD began to provide advice on the defence of North America — spurred on by the extreme sense of urgency given World War II. In its first five years, the Board met 42 times and advised on a wide range of sensitive issues such as the defence of Newfoundland to the construction of the Alaska Highway.



First meeting of the PJBD in Ottawa on 26 August 1940.⁴

After the war, American civilian security agencies, such as the White House National Security Council, were created, and the PJBD recommended the creation of the Military Cooperation Committee (MCC). This reduced the number of PJBD meetings in favour of the new military-to-military committee.⁵ Despite the thinning of its agenda, the PJBD advised on the implementation of the North American Air (later Aerospace) Defense Command, the Distant Early Warning (DEW) Line, the construction of the St. Lawrence Seaway, the Y2K bug at the beginning of the 21st century, and successive NORAD agreement renewals to name a few issues.⁶

As a direct line of defence advice to the U.S. President and Canadian Prime Minister, the PJBD

benefits from discussing sensitive and controversial political topics in a frank manner, away from the media spotlight and public access. The Board brings together pertinent civilian, military, and security advisers from both sides of the border (including Homeland Security and Public Safety officials),⁷ and executive support is provided by the Assistant Deputy Minister Politics (ADMPol) and the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Homeland Defense and America's Security Affairs.⁸ Notwithstanding the multiple actor approach to advice creation, the PJBD has long suffered from an identity crisis — mostly due to the dominance of the MCC as the technical military advice provider.⁹

Even as NORAD evolved with the Airborne Warning and Control System (AWACS) and the DEW line transitioned into the North Warning System, which were both recommendations of the PJBD, historian Christopher Conliffe states that from 1964 to 1988, the Board was in its 6th evolutionary phase, of which he called “Limbo.”¹⁰

Conliffe's 6 Phases of the PJBD are as follows:

- 1) 1940 - 1945: The War Years
- 2) 1945 - 1950: Uncertainty
- 3) 1950 - 1953: The Last Fling
- 4) 1954 - 1959: Decline
- 5) 1960 - 1963: Eclipse
- 6) 1963 - 1988: Limbo¹¹

Dr. P. Whitney Lackenbauer has written extensively on Conliffe's phases.¹² 30 years later, in 2018, Dr. Andrea Charron told a parliamentary committee that the PJBD “seems to need life support.”¹³

Today's Challenges

The geopolitical landscape has changed since the end of the Cold War, and most particularly in the last few years given the rise of peer competitors to the United States. Climate change, COVID-19, and a wariness between Canada and the United States during the Trump administration created tension in this binational relationship. While the PJBD did not meet in 2020, it did celebrate its 80th anniversary in Washington DC organized by Dr. Andrea Charron at Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies on 17 January 2021 with the then cochairs US LGen (ret) Chris Miller and the Honourable John McKay, practitioners and academics. And more recently, on the occasion of its 239th meeting in June 2021, the new U.S. co-Chair, Dr. Mara Karlin, the Acting Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs, and the Canadian co-Chair, the Honourable John McKay, a long-time Liberal MP, "reviewed a framework to guide NORAD modernization efforts to improve capabilities necessary for NORAD to conduct its aerospace and maritime warning and aerospace control missions."¹⁴



(L) MP Hon. John McKay, P.C., and (R) Dr. Mara Karlin, Assistant Secretary of Defense for Strategy, Plans and Capabilities (former Acting Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs)¹⁵

This press release is important for four reasons. First, this is the first meeting of the Board since June 2019 and the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Second, NORAD modernization was an important topic and is a welcome sign that Canada-U.S. defence relations are back on the agenda. Third, it is unprecedented for the PJBD to release a public statement that it even met. While one press release is not an indication of a trend, a statement alone is reason enough for optimism that the Board will continue to meet.

Finally, the new U.S. co-Chair was quickly appointed and with a civil servant with deep knowledge of the Western Hemisphere appointed.¹⁶ The US has kept the position vacant (from 2009 – 2011 and 2016-2017) and has been slow on occasion to appoint a representative. Canada had no representative from 1987 – 1989.¹⁷

This bucks a recent shift of American co-Chairs (Congressmen of the same party, for example) having close political affiliation to the President. Karlin's appointment also represents that the current White House may be considering the Board with the seriousness it deserves given the current threats to continental defence. It also must be mentioned that Dr. Karlin is the first woman to hold the position of American co-Chair.¹⁸ Canada's first and only female representative was the Honourable Judi Longfield, PC (2004 – 2006).

The North Warning System (NWS) renewal is likely to have been a topic of conversation on 25 June 2021. Its reimagining will be expensive to adapt to deter and detect technologically advanced high-speed, high-altitude and low-speed, low-altitude weapons.¹⁹ Access to this closed-door North American advice body in a climate of hyper partisanship is vital for both states.

For example, future concern of growing international tension, threat of kinetic action, or strategic competition in the context of the Canadian Arctic, would almost assuredly send the Canadian public into a frenzy, much like Paul Martin's Ballistic Missile Defense decision in 2005 did. An opportunity to discuss such issues in secret has been a key reason for the PJBD's continued existence.

A recent joint statement by the Canadian Minister of Defence and American Secretary of Defense suggests NORAD modernization will continue to be a key issue both states. The leaders noted the desire to "guide cooperation between Canada and the United States to enhance the ability of [...] NORAD to execute the missions outlined in the NORAD Agreement while facing evolving threats."²⁰ This statement and the PJBD press release suggest that that modernization is set to dominate the attention of the MCC and the PJBD.

Next Steps

On 18 August 2021, the Board turned 81 years old. Just as the PJBD was born of the urgency of preparations to defend the continent during World War II, its agenda is largely a function of the gravity of purpose, given external factors.²¹

As politically sensitive initiatives, such as NORAD modernization and climate change, receive more public attention, a forum such as the PJBD, is best suited to handle these frank, private, and sensitive discussions. These meetings should resume annual meetings although more may be required.

The PJBD can provide more diverse representation by various government actors and agencies, relative to the agenda, than the MCC. With direct access to the President and Prime Minister, the PJBD is potentially more important than many ever

consider. Perhaps this latest evolution in the PJBD's life cycle means an addition to Conliffe's 6 phases: perhaps the Board is entering a new 7th phase of renewed purpose.

THE WHITE HOUSE

FOR THE PRESS

August 18, 1940

The following joint statement of the President and the Prime Minister of Canada, Mackenzie King, is released for papers appearing on the streets not earlier than 9 o'clock P.M., Eastern Standard Time, today, August 18th, 1940. The same limitation applies to use by radio broadcasters or radio news commentators.

William D. Hassett

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

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

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

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

The Permanent Joint Board on Defense will consist of four or five Members from each country, most of them from the Services. It will meet shortly.

NOTE: This release constitutes what is commonly referred to as the "OGDENSBURG AGREEMENT".

The original White House joint press release on 18 August 1940, known as "The Ogdensburg Agreement."²²

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- ² David Beatty, "The 'Canadian Corollary' to the Monroe Doctrine and The Ogdensburg Agreement of 1940," *The Northern Mariner* 1, no.1 (January 1991): 4-5.
- ³ *Ibid.*, 12.
- ⁴ "Ogdensburg Agreement, 1940," *The Ohio State University*, accessed 22 July 2021, <https://ehistory.osu.edu/exhibitions/arctic-sovereignty/ogdensburg>.
- ⁵ "The Permanent Joint Board on Defence (PJBD): How Permanent and Joint? Celebrating 80 Years of Cooperation," *Centre for Defence and Security Studies*, 25 February 2020, 4, <https://umanitoba.ca/centres/media/The-Permanent-Joint-Board-on-Defence-final-workshop-report-2020.pdf>.
- ⁶ *Ibid.*, 5-6.
- ⁷ Dwight Mason, "The Canadian-American North American Defence Alliance in 2005," *International Journal* 60, no. 2 (Spring 2005): 386.
- ⁸ Randy Kee, "U.S.-Canada Arctic Collaboration: Research, Security, and Environmental Considerations," in *The United States and Canada: Agenda 2021*, ed. Jacqueline Orr (Washington, D.C.: Wilson Center Canada Institute, 2021), 23, https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/media/uploads/documents/The%20United%20States%20and%20Canada_Agenda%202021_1.pdf.
- ⁹ "The Permanent Joint Board on Defence (PJBD): How Permanent and Joint?," 5.
- ¹⁰ P. Whitney Lackenbauer, "Permanency, Reassurance, and Quiet Diplomacy: The Permanent Joint Board on Defence (PJBD) at Eighty," *NAADSN Quick Impact*, 16 August 2020, 5, <https://www.naadsn.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/20-Aug-Lackenbauer-PJBD-at-Eighty.pdf>.
- ¹¹ Christopher Conliffe, "The Permanent Joint Board on Defence, 1940-1988," in *The US-Canada Security Relationships: The Politics, Strategy and Technology of Defense*, eds. David Haglund and Joel Sokolsky (Boulder: Westview, 1989), 150, 162.
- ¹² Lackenbauer, "Permanency, Reassurance, and Quiet Diplomacy," 6.
- ¹³ Canada, Parliament, House of Commons, Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Development, *Evidence*, 1st session, 42nd Parliament, Number 111, <https://www.ourcommons.ca/DocumentViewer/en/42-1/FAAE/meeting-111/evidence>.
- ¹⁴ "U.S.-Canada Permanent Joint Board on Defense Discusses Defense Priorities, NORAD Modernization," *U.S. Department of Defense*, 25 June 2021, <https://www.defense.gov/Newsroom/Releases/Release/Article/2671975/us-canada-permanent-joint-board-on-defense-discusses-defense-priorities-norad-m/>.
- ¹⁵ "The Honourable John McKay," *House of Commons*, accessed 16 August 2021, [https://www.ourcommons.ca/members/en/john-mckay\(957\)](https://www.ourcommons.ca/members/en/john-mckay(957)). ; "Dr. Marla Karlin: Acting Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs," *U.S. Department of Defense*, accessed 23 July 2021, <https://www.defense.gov/Our-Story/Biographies/Biography/Article/2499282/dr-mara-karlin/>.
- ¹⁶ "Dr. Marla Karlin," *U.S. Department of Defense*, <https://www.defense.gov/Our-Story/Biographies/Biography/Article/2499282/dr-mara-karlin/>.
- ¹⁷ "The Permanent Joint Board on Defence (PJBD): How Permanent and Joint? Celebrating 80 Years of Cooperation," *Centre for Defence and Security Studies*, 25 February 2020, Annex II, <https://umanitoba.ca/centres/media/The-Permanent-Joint-Board-on-Defence-final-workshop-report-2020.pdf>.
- ¹⁸ "The Permanent Joint Board on Defence (PJBD): How Permanent and Joint?," 11-16.
- ¹⁹ Jim Bell, "Defence expert slams Ottawa for ignoring North Warning System upgrade," *Nunatsiaq News*, 20 January 2020, <https://nunatsiaq.com/stories/article/defence-expert-slams-ottawa-for-ignoring-north-warning-system-upgrade/>.
- ²⁰ "Joint Statement on Norad Modernization," *Government of Canada Department of National Defence*, 14 August 2021, <https://www.canada.ca/en/department-national-defence/news/2021/08/joint-statement-on-norad-modernization.html>.
- ²¹ Andrea Charron and Nicholas Glesby, "After 80 years of advice, joint body's work on North American defence as necessary as ever," *The Hill Times*, 19 August 2020, <https://www.hilltimes.com/2020/08/19/after-80-years-of-advice-joint-bodys-work-on-north-american-defence-as-necessary-as-ever/260280>.

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²² Franklin D. Roosevelt, "The Great Communicator": The Master Speech Files, 1898, 1910-1945 File No. 1168 (August 18, 1938) Kingston, Ontario, Canada - Address at Queens University: 4.