

February 17, 2023

NORAD's Aerospace Warning Mission: Reflections on Recent Incursions

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The North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD) is responsible for the aerospace warning, aerospace control, and maritime warning of North America. The command is organized binationally, with Canadians and Americans service members operating jointly to track and assess air objects. For the first time in years, NORAD has re-entered public discourse and attention.

Between 4 February and 10 February 2023, four air objects were shot down in North American airspace over the Atlantic, Alaska, the Yukon, and Lake Huron. This is the first time, at least known publicly, that national command authorities (NCA) (the Canadian Prime Minister and the American President) have authorized this action. Both Biden and Trudeau have characterized these objects, flying between 20,000 and 60,000 feet, as threats to civilian aircraft.¹

A great deal of public conversation has centred around the aerospace control component of NORAD's mission suite relative to the NCA and use of fighter interceptors. However, there is little discussion about the aerospace warning function, which this Quick Impact briefly explores and raises timely questions.

Lessons Learned and Questions Raised from the 2023 incidents

During the Pentagon Press Briefing on 12 February 2023, US Assistant Secretary of Defense for Homeland Defense and Hemispheric Affairs Melissa Dalton (who also serves as the U.S. co-Chair of the Permanent Joint Board on Defence)² and General Glen VanHerck, the dual-hatted Commander of NORAD and USNORTHCOM, discussed the Lake Huron shoot down.

Dalton mentioned that NORAD has been "more closely scrutinizing our airspace at these altitudes, enhancing our radar, which may at least partly explain the increase in the objects detected."³ President Biden reiterated this on 16 February.⁴ While this adjustment of filters to see high-altitude, low-speed objects is beneficial, it begs the questions of: Why had this change not already been issued? Is it a change in risk analysis? And if so, what prompted the change?

NORAD and USNORTHCOM's Global Information Dominance Exercises (GIDE) seek to break down information barriers and data stovepipes with cross-US Combatant Command collaboration and artificial intelligence.⁵ There is a growing realization that combatant commands need to share more information with one another. This is pertinent given NORAD and USNORTHCOM represent the first line of continental defence. It is a work in progress.

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One wonders if the initial flight path of the Chinese high-altitude surveillance balloon, which is suspected of taking off from the Hainan Islands, was detected by INDOPACOM or other allies before it reached the Alaskan Air Defence Identification Zone (AADIZ) over the Aleutian Islands on 28 January. ⁶ Was enough information integrated and shared to perhaps have allowed the NCA's (POTUS and PM) to make an earlier decision to shoot down the object? Or was more time needed to assess its capabilities, intentions, and flight path?

RCAF Major-General Scott Clancy (Ret'd), former NORAD Director of Operations (J3), [acknowledged](#) the enhancements of sensors as a possibility of seeing these slow-moving, high-altitude threats. ⁷ However, Clancy's point regarding letting military intelligence and national security intelligence agencies complete due diligence is especially salient. As he pointedly states, US and Canadian accusations against other states regarding these air objects can have consequential and severe political, diplomatic, strategic, and economic ramifications. ⁸ This is a point echoed by Andrea Charron, co-author of [NORAD: In Perpetuity and Beyond](#). Further, she notes that the high-altitude surveillance balloon is likely unrelated to the other three objects. Precipitous accusations are especially dangerous in heightened geopolitical tensions. ⁹

Dalton, Clancy, and Charron present reasonable and viable explanations for why NORAD is detecting more lower altitude air objects and why little information has been made public. In a geopolitically complex international security environment, assertion must be grounded in evidence and fact. Waiting for the intelligence communities to conduct their assessments first is prudent. President Biden reiterated this process on 16 February, where he also indicated that the last three objects were not tied to adversarial state surveillance efforts based on the most recent intelligence efforts. ¹⁰

In the meantime, NORAD Modernization is well [underway](#) and the events of the last two weeks have only heightened awareness about the necessity for capability upgrades. ¹¹ The drive is to eliminate "gaps in domain awareness." ¹² Of course, Russia's attack on Ukraine had primed the Canadian public to think more seriously about Canada's defence capabilities. A year later, the political agenda has reacted by placing NORAD, an institution that has largely existed out of sight and out of mind, ¹³ at the top of the priority list.

Most Canadians and Americans know little of the binational command, beyond the annual 'NORAD Tracks Santa' tradition. The events of the last two weeks have again highlighted the true value of binationalism to Canada and the US. ¹⁴ In addition to the need for greater public awareness and understanding of NORAD's importance, it is imperative that domestic politicking does not interfere or sow discord with respect to the role the binational command has in protecting the continent. Doing so plays into the disinformation game that adversaries continuously and actively attempt to exploit. NORAD continues to have "The Watch" and is North America's first line of defence.

Notes

* Thanks to Dr. Andrea Charron for her assistance and guidance.

¹ Stephanie Levitz, “How big a threat were the UFOs shot down in Canada and the U.S.?” *Toronto Star*, 14 February 2023, <https://www.thestar.com/politics/federal/2023/02/14/how-big-a-threat-were-the-ufos-shot-down-in-canada-and-the-us.html>.

² Government of the United States, “Readout of the 240th Meeting of the U.S.-Canada Permanent Joint Board on Defense,” U.S. Department of Defense, 28 October 2022, <https://www.defense.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/3203702/readout-of-the-240th-meeting-of-the-us-canada-permanent-joint-board-on-defense/>. For more on the PJBD, see: Nicholas Glesby, “The Permanent Joint Board on Defence: Foundational to ‘Limbo’ to a Renewed Purpose?” North American and Arctic Defence and Security Network *Policy Brief*, 30 August 2021, <https://www.naadsn.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/Nicholas-Glesby-NAADSN-PJBD-Policy-Brief-August-2021.pdf>.

³ Government of the United States, “Melissa Dalton Assistant Secretary of Defense for Homeland Defense and Hemispheric Affairs and Gen. Glen VanHerck, Commander, North American Aerospace Defense Command and United States Northern Command, Hold an Off-Camera, On-The-Record Briefing,” U.S. Department of Defense, 12 February 2023, <https://www.defense.gov/News/Transcripts/Transcript/Article/3296177/melissa-dalton-assistant-secretary-of-defense-for-homeland-defense-and-hemisphe/>.

⁴ The White House, “Remarks by President Biden on the United States’ Response to Recent Aerial Objects,” 16 February 2023, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2023/02/16/remarks-by-president-biden-on-the-united-states-response-to-recent-aerial-objects/>.

⁵ NORAD and U.S. Northern Command Public Affairs, “NORAD and U.S. Northern Command lead the third Global Information Dominance Experiment (GIDE),” North American Aerospace Defense Command, 21 July 2021, <https://www.norad.mil/Newsroom/Article/2703605/norad-and-us-northern-command-lead-the-third-global-information-dominance-exper/>.

⁶ Ellen Nakashima, Shane Harris, and Jason Samenow, “U.S. tracked China spy balloon from launch on Hainan Island along unusual path,” *The Washington Post*, 14 February 2023, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/2023/02/14/china-spy-balloon-path-tracking-weather/>.

⁷ For more information on non-traditional air threats to North America, see: Andrea Charron, Jill Barclay, Nicholas Glesby, and Daniel Kiesman, “Report: NORAD Modernization Closed Door Workshop,” North American and Arctic Defence and Security Network, Network for Strategic Analysis, and the Centre for Defence and Security Studies, 21 June 2021, <https://www.naadsn.ca/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/NORAD-Workshop-21-June-2021-Report-FINAL.pdf>.

⁸ Scott Clancy, “The question that I get asked the most about balloons and objects: What is going on? Anderson Cooper last night discussed much of the needed details. I am looking forward to exploring even more with him tonight. The best I can do is help explain the complicated business of [#NORAD](#) so that both our

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nations' citizens can understand.... what is going on!" LinkedIn, 14 February 2023, https://www.linkedin.com/posts/scott-clancy-coach-speaker-mentor-author-3901115a_norad-activity-7031244377922433024--2J?utm_source=share&utm_medium=member_desktop.

⁹ See: Andrea Charron on CBC Live, 14 February 2023, https://cbchls.akamaized.net/delivery/news/2023/02/14/ct-Charron-invu-130223-01-28-14/ct-Charron-invu-130223_5000kbps.mp4.

¹⁰ The White House, "Remarks by President Biden on the United States' Response to Recent Aerial Objects," 16 February 2022, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2023/02/16/remarks-by-president-biden-on-the-united-states-response-to-recent-aerial-objects/>.

¹¹ Andrea Charron, "Amid tumultuous times, NORAD needs a consistent Canada-U.S. commitment," *The Conversation*, 5 January 2023, <https://theconversation.com/amid-tumultuous-times-norad-needs-a-consistent-canada-u-s-commitment-197162>.

¹² Zachary Cohen, "Exclusive: US intel assessment documents Chinese spy balloon incident under Trump," CNN, 6 February 2023, <https://www.cnn.com/2023/02/06/politics/military-intelligence-report-china-balloon-trump/index.html>.

¹³ See: Andrea Charron and James Fergusson, "Out of sight, out of mind: NORAD vis-à-vis CANUS politics," *Canadian Foreign Policy Journal* 26, no. 2 (2020): 137-151, <https://umanitoba.ca/arts/sites/arts/files/2022-07/Out-of-sight-out-of-mind-NORAD-vis-a-vis-CANUS-politics.pdf>.

¹⁴ Lee Botts and Paul Muldoon, "Using the Boundary Waters Treaty for the 21st Century: Revitalizing the Great Lakes Governance Regime," *Wayne Law Review* 54 (2008): 1558.