

February 11, 2025

Defence of the Arctic: 10 to 2 O'Clock

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Donald Trump is forcing all levels of Canadian governments and Canadians to rethink many of the long held assumptions about what it means to be an ally of the United States. Border security is thickening, a fentanyl czar is proposed, trade negotiators are preparing arguments to counter the threat of tariffs, and there is renewed emphasis on spending 2% of GDP on defence. Anything that benefits Canada and address US concerns are helpful. Off the cuff suggestions are not.

[In a Globe and Mail article](#) on 30 January 2025, Danielle Smith, Premier of Alberta, was quoted as “suggest[ing] that Canada deepen collaboration with the U.S. on Arctic security and aerospace defence by establishing a joint NORAD military base in the Canadian North”.

There is a helpful sentiment to this statement but three problems with this proposal. First, the sentiment, if read as the United States and Canada must jointly improve the defence of North America, especially through the myriad North American Aerospace Defence Command (NORAD) modernization projects, is true and helpful. [The binational NORAD](#), operational since 1957, has three missions to warn of aerospace threats incoming to North America (from all approaches, not just the Arctic), defeat the air threats when necessary (aerospace control) and warn of maritime threats. This requires resources, coordination, and a continued binational approach – meaning the joint defence of North America, not just of Canada or of the United States in parallel. This will require deepening cooperation and integration. Recent [Russian](#) and [Chinese actions](#) has shown that the defence of North America can no longer be taken for granted, and must evolve to keep pace with our adversaries. Ms. Smith is absolutely correct.

The three problems, however, are as follows. First, the statement suggests that there is no NORAD presence in the Arctic. There is, in fact, a very large NORAD base in the Arctic – at Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson, Alaska - covering [the Alaskan NORAD region](#) with a Canadian Deputy Commander, mandated to assist, as per the binational agreement, all of North America. It is one of the three NORAD regional headquarters. The other is in [Winnipeg for Canada](#) and Tyndall Florida for [the continental United States](#). What is more, the most important NORAD assets are found in Alaska, Canada and Greenland – the series of short and long range radars called the [North Warning System](#) – which will soon be augmented with [an Arctic and Polar Over the Horizon Radar Systems](#), not to mention maritime sensors, satellites and new command and control systems to benefit the Arctic and all of North America.

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Next, Canada has [four forward operating locations](#) for NORAD fighter jets in Yellowknife, Iqaluit, Inuvik and Goose Bay. Canada's signals' intelligence base [ALERT](#) in the high Arctic at the tip of Ellesmere Island provides vital geolocation capability to support operations and high frequency and direction-finding facilities to support Search and Rescue (SAR) and other operations. Beyond NORAD, Canada's primary and persistent military presence in the Canadian Arctic is [Joint Task Force North \(JTFN\)](#) headquartered in Yellowknife (Northwest Territories) with small detachments in Whitehorse (Yukon) and Iqaluit (Nunavut). JTFN is responsible for all of the Arctic, the largest geographic region of any of Canadian Joint Operation Command's (CJOC) six Regional Joint Task Forces (RJTF) supported by fewer than 300 military personnel. The other essential military presence in the Canadian Arctic is the 1,725 Canadian Rangers of the 1 Canadian Ranger Patrol Group which falls under the Canadian Army Reserves.

But the most problematic error is to assume that more military/NORAD is the solution to a myriad of safety and security issues that are not in the purview or mandate of the military to fix. Arctic hamlets have some of the [highest suicide rates](#), they lack infrastructure, adequate housing, affordable food, access to tertiary health care, and reliable and affordable internet. None of this is solved by more military in the Arctic. In many cases, they will exacerbate the lack of housing, infrastructure and drain the energy supplies of the Arctic communities. Climate change is the existential threat but all of these safety issues [in and to](#) the Arctic are not for the military to solve.

The question to ask is what are the problems and what are the corresponding solutions? NORAD has a plan and funding commitments to manage threats through the Arctic. Canada's biggest contribution is to warn of and control any aerospace threats approaching North America from the Arctic between 10 and 2 on a clock face. While approaches from 10 and 2 are reasonably covered by air defences, it is the 12 o'clock position that needs attention given that ALERT, for example, [is 3,990 kilometres from Winnipeg](#) and the main fighter bases in Canada are in Cold Lake, Alberta and Bagotville, Quebec. Climate changes, lack of reliable fuel sources, and infrastructure, however, mean a NORAD-like base in the Canadian Arctic is unlikely. Rather, the focus is on sensors to warn of any threats as far away in time and space as possible hence the need for NORAD modernization to proceed apace.

What Canada does need immediately, and is easily achieved, is a named operation for continental defence missions. [OP Nanook](#) (the four times yearly exercises) in the north is linked to sovereignty/presence and working with other government departments and local communities. It has never been about the defence of North America directly. Rather, they are geared to test consequence management, environmental protection, and support to the RCMP. Naming an operation (such as [OP REASSURANCE](#) - CAF support to NATO's assurance and deterrence measures in Central and Eastern Europe) means that the operation is funded, resourced, and tracked by the Canadian Joint Operations Command to ensure the operation's success including collection of data and metrics connected to the operation.

The defence of North America, primarily achieved via NORAD but also other missions, has no named operation. That means, for example, that when jets are scrambled to meet a Russian fighter in the Arctic, there are no incremental funds apportioned to the RCAF for this mission. Often money from other funds (such as routine

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Operations & Maintenance- or O&M) need to be used at risk. Now, the O&M funds apportioned to the RCAF are typically limited and tailored to routine operations and there is no specific additional incremental and allocated operational reserve provided for the defence of North America which includes the Arctic.

Premier Smith's call should have been for a report on the status of NORAD modernization projects from Canada and the United States and a named operation for the defence of North America. I suggest OP KANATA but there are other options. Most importantly, a named operation means that future defence decisions can be made with data and evidence.

This piece is published in partnership with the Wilson Center's [Canada Institute](#).