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North American Defence Cooperation

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On February 13, 2017, President Trump and Prime Minister Justin Trudeau announced a bilateral commitment to modernize NORAD — though at the time, details were scarce and funding even scarcer. Fast forward to today: billions of dollars have been allocated, and policy now supports dozens of initiatives. We've moved far beyond the original 2011 vision of a simple one-for-one replacement of the North Warning System. Today, NORAD modernization has become shorthand for a comprehensive rethinking of continental defense.

This Quick Impact highlights 4 projects and decisions related to NORAD and the Arctic and then raises 3 areas to watch for the future.

NORAD's 3 missions — aerospace warning and control and maritime warning, are the front line of defence for North America because the major threat vector to attack the United States is over the Arctic ocean and the likelihood of a direct conflict between the US and one of its four principal adversaries is increasing.

Radars in Canada have provided advanced air and missile warning for more than 67 years. Because the NORAD binational agreement was signed in perpetuity in 2006, there isn't the political scrutiny of the relationship that there once was and the higher profile USNORTHCOM missions are more likely to get the attention of the armed services committee in the United States. The fraternity and the sorority of the uniform¹ at NORAD remains strong. There is high confidence in General Guillot's leadership and there has been absolutely no hint of NORAD billets being cancelled or altered.

NORAD and continental modernization continue apace in Canada. The projects are a combination of new capabilities, infrastructure, campaign footing, a war-fighting mindset and cloud-based command and control changes. I want to highlight 3 projects and an important Canadian decision.

- 1) NORAD Northern Basing infrastructure (NNBI) focuses on 3 Forward Operating Locations (Inuvik — a top priority because of its location, Yellowknife and Iqaluit) and Goose Bay — a deployed operating base.

¹ Credit goes to Joel Sokolsky for coining these terms.

There are 50 + sub projects associated with the NNBI. Common to all forward operating locations are fuel facilities, power grid modernization, operations facilities, multi-use facilities, Info Management/IT upgrades and munitions storage facilities.

Inuvik will also have multi-platform hangars and a Strategic Tanker Transport Capability hangar. Given the remote locations of the FOLs in particular, completion of these projects will require at least a decade.

- 2) The other update concerns the new radars for increased surveillance in the Arctic. The first is Arctic OTHR radar system that will be based in southern Ontario. The Australian Jindalee system has been chosen. Cross training between CAF and Australian military will begin shortly. The AOHTR will provide wide area surveillance capability to enable long-range situational awareness to NORAD and other force employers in the Arctic region. The northeastern site in southern Ontario has been confirmed but the northwestern site needs to be confirmed. The Arctic OTHR will extend warning in Canada's Arctic.
- 3) The other related system (formerly the polar OTHR) now called North Watch will extend surveillance coverage over the pole and will likely be a layered system with ground and space-based systems. This will likely not come online until 2032.
- 4) Minister of Defence McGinty announced on 16 July 2025 that Canada [would explore air and missile defence capabilities](#) which removed a barrier Canada had to participate in the US midcourse ground based ballistic missile defence system. This opens the door for ongoing talks about integrated air and missile defence, Golden Dome and Canadian systems and contributions.

3 Areas to Watch

Although Canada's Arctic often receives significant attention due to the vast distances involved and lack of infrastructure, I believe greater focus should be placed on the Alaska–North American Arctic Region (ANAR), particularly since the only observed Russian–Chinese joint missions outside the Russian Arctic have occurred in the Bering Sea and near the Aleutians. If we imagine Arctic threats as positions on a clock face, the sector from 9 to 9:30 warrants increased scrutiny.

Additionally, achieving shared situational awareness between NATO and NORAD in the Arctic remains an ongoing objective and a work in progress.

Lastly, ensuring NORAD can rapidly scale up and sustain operations over extended periods—spanning several days or even weeks—remains a critical area to monitor.