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The Permanent Joint Board on Defence has been paused. What's next?

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The Canada-United States Permanent Joint Board on Defence (PJBD) provides recommendations on mutual defence and security concerns directly to the executive branches for action. Its genesis is the August 1940 Ogdensburg Agreement, when President Franklin Roosevelt and Prime Minister Mackenzie King agreed to a one-page, joint press-release announcing the creation of the Board and providing it with a simple mandate: to study, advise, and make recommendations on any defence and security issue in the “north half of the western hemisphere.”¹ Its creation marked the point of origin of the modern Canada-US defence relationship.² Bringing together civilian and military practitioners under hand-picked, equal leadership, the PJBD has made consequential recommendations on large-scale defence items over the course of its storied 86-year legacy: the construction of the Alaska Highway, defending Newfoundland, the integration of each state’s air defence systems into NORAD (the North American Aerospace Defense Command) and subsequent renewals, and the addition of the maritime warning mission suite following the September 11th, 2001 attacks.³ The PJBD met for the 242nd time in Ottawa in November 2024, when the Canadian section hosted and provided its first ever readout of topics discussed. Of priority were issues such as the implementation of NORAD modernization initiatives, Arctic security, climate change, and critical minerals.⁴

The Board has met annually in recent years, rotating between capitals. The US did not hold a meeting in 2025 and has not done so under the second Trump administration. Neither country has appointed a new co-chair since both governments changed hands early last year. Besides its storied legacy, including its famous co-chairs like Fiorello LaGuardia, Dean Acheson, and General Andrew McNaughton,⁵ the PJBD’s ingenuity rests with three distinct factors: 1) depending on the agenda and issues of the day, the Board’s composition can flex to include non-traditionally defence-related government departments and agencies, providing a broader view of security; 2) it provides a dialogue for frank, off-the-record, private discussion, away from media spotlight - particularly useful for complex and controversial issues; and 3) its binational nature means Canadian and US input is equal. Given today’s complex continental

security environment, the PJBD would appear to be an opportune venue for Canada and the US to strike consensus on technologically complex and sensitive defence and security concerns of shared interest in the defence of North America.⁶ This makes the US pause even more perplexing.

Under Secretary Colby's statement announcing the US pause⁷ suggests that Canada continues to be weak on defence, a narrative continually amplified by the current US administration to denigrate and chastize historic underspending.⁸ Canada, however, has recently met 2% of spending on defence, more than six years earlier than Prime Minister Trudeau committed to at the 2024 NATO Summit in Washington.⁹ NORAD modernization projects are continuing apace. The initial construction of the Arctic Over-the-Horizon Radar site is underway in southern Ontario to surveil and track threats through the Canadian Arctic.¹⁰ The Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF) is set to receive its first delivery of the F-35 fighters in the coming weeks, with pilots currently in Arizona for training.¹¹ Last July, Minister of National Defence McGuinty declared that restrictions on participating in ballistic missile defence had been lifted.¹² And two months ago, Prime Minister Carney announced an investment package of \$35 billion in the Canadian North to revitalize airports and runways, highways, enable resource extraction and development, and Northern Operational Support Hubs and Nodes to enable and sustain NORAD and CAF operations.¹³ Indeed, in the leadup to the Ogdensburg Agreement's signing, Prime Minister Mackenzie King forcefully stated that Canada's obligation, "as a good and friendly neighbour," is to make Canadian territory "immune from attack or possible invasion" that would threaten American security. This sentiment still holds true and guides continental defence thinking today.¹⁴

The PJBD's pause is confounding, and it is difficult to ascertain the true reason behind the Undersecretary's intention. Three reasons could be at play. First, this pause is nothing more than a formality. To PJBD observers, the absence of a US-hosted meeting in 2025 was already indicative of a pause. When the Board does resume, it will be the US' opportunity to set the agenda and outline priority topics and issue areas. Based on recent precedent, Undersecretary Colby would assume the US co-Chairship.¹⁵ Second, this could be US leverage for Canadian concessions in broader trade or defence procurement negotiations: DND is reviewing the F-35 contract and CUSMA renegotiations are set to begin this summer. Third, the United States is reconsidering the role of binational institutions and technocratic, expert advice in North American defence and security planning. Should this indeed be the case, this is a moment for Canada to reflect, reconsider, and rethink our engagement and how best to achieve our national interests and objectives when it comes to continental defence.

The PJBD has met with varying frequencies at different times in its existence. Typically, meetings are less frequent when there is little political attention paid to the defence of North America, such as following the end of the Cold War. Herein lies part of the PJBD's beauty: with no cost, secretariat or institutionalized bureaucracy behind it, the Board's institutional momentum alone keeps it going. It can be stood up at a moment's notice to convene experts, create advice, and provide recommendations.

Surely there is still value in having this sort of consultative and problem-solving dialogue.¹⁶ Canada-US scholar and analyst Dr. Christopher Sands notes the “sometimes-undisciplined nature of policymaking within the Trump administration” and the centralized management style means “that the PJBD pause could eventually be softened or quietly reversed.”¹⁷

The PJBD, while having a storied legacy of providing consequential advice, is not the only binational forum working to defend North America. The Military Cooperation Committee (MCC), the PJBD’s twin, is active and focuses on military-to-military dialogue.¹⁸ NORAD continues to have “The Watch” over North America, with Canadians and Americans working in an integrated command and control arrangement to provide aerospace warning and control and maritime warning of Canada and the continental United States.¹⁹ And professionalized, routine, and open channels between policymakers in NDHQ and the Pentagon remain.

Undersecretary Colby’s statement is astonishing in the sense that the secretive PJBD has been thrust into the public spotlight. The Board has been on *de-facto* pause given it did not meet last year, which has happened before throughout its history. What is new is the nature in which the pause was announced. While the Pentagon considers its next steps and we await more information, Canada will continue to move forward with its generational defence investments. When the time comes for the Board to be revitalized and meetings grapple with the “most complicated and rapidly evolving threat environment we have seen,”²⁰ the closed-door forum that facilitates frank and private discussions on the thorniest of issues will continue to be “linked by history, collaboration, and a shared commitment to defending North America.”²¹ In the meantime, Canada will need to focus on other channels to maintain its enduring links to its southern and western neighbour in the defence and security space.

Notes

¹ “Joint Statement by the Government of Canada and of the United States of American Regarding Defence Cooperation Between the Two Countries – E100977 – CTS 1947 No. 43,” *Government of Canada*, last accessed 19 May 2026, <https://www.treaty-accord.gc.ca/text-texte.aspx?id=100977>.

² For more analysis on the Board’s use in difficult geopolitical and bilateral times, see: 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/267681/>.

³ For more, see: Andrea Charron, Nicholas Glesby, Laura Conrad and Channah Greenfield, “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, 5-6, https://umanitoba.ca/arts/sites/arts/files/2022-07/The-Permanent-Joint-Board-on-Defence-final-workshop-report_2020.pdf.

⁴ Department of National Defence, “The 242nd Meeting of the Permanent Joint Board on Defence,” *Government of Canada*, 14 November 2024, <https://www.canada.ca/en/department-national-defence/news/2024/11/the-242nd-meeting-of-the-permanent-joint-board-on-defense.html>.

⁵ See: “The Permanent Joint Board on Defence (PJBD): How Permanent and Joint? Celebrating 80 Years of Cooperation,” 11.

⁶ P. Whitney Lackenbauer, “Permanency, Reassurance, and Quiet Diplomacy: The Permanent Joint Board on Defence (PJBD) at Eighty,” *North American and Arctic Defence and Security Network*, 16 August 2020, 2, <https://www.naadsn.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/20-Aug-Lackenbauer-PJBD-at-Eighty.pdf>.

⁷ US Under Secretary of War Elbridge Colby (@USWPColby), “A strong Canada that prioritizes hard power over rhetoric benefits us all. Unfortunately, Canada has failed to make credible progress on its defense commitments. DoW is pausing the Permanent Joint Board on Defense to reassess how this forum benefits shared North American defense. We can no longer avoid the gaps between rhetoric and reality,” X, 18 May 2026, <https://x.com/USWPColby/status/2056348930078630134?s=20>.

⁸ For example, see: “The far north has become NATO’s soft underbelly, writes John Bolton,” *The Economist*, 11 August 2025, <https://www.economist.com/by-invitation/2025/08/11/the-far-north-has-become-natos-soft-underbelly-writes-john-bolton>; For a repudiation, see: Andrea Charron, “Is the Arctic NATO’s soft underbelly?” *The Economist*, 4 September 2025, <https://www.economist.com/letters/2025/09/04/is-the-arctic-natos-soft-underbelly>.

⁹ Department of National Defence, “Defence Minister Blair concludes productive visit to Washington, D.C. for NATO Summit,” *Government of Canada*, 12 July 2024, <https://www.canada.ca/en/department-national-defence/news/2024/07/defence-minister-blair-concludes-productive-visit-to-washington-dc-for-nato-summit.html>; Department of National Defence, “Canada achieves the 2% of gross domestic product defence spending benchmark,” *Government of Canada*, 26 March 2026, <https://www.canada.ca/en/department-national-defence/news/2026/03/canada-achieves-the-2-of-gross-domestic-product-defence-spending-benchmark.html>.

¹⁰ Nicholas Glesby, “Canada’s Arctic Over-the-Horizon Radar: Early-Warning for the Defence of North America?” *North American and Arctic Defence and Security Network*, 17 December 2025, <https://www.naadsn.ca/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/25-dec-Canadas-Arctic-Over-the-Horizon-Radar-Policy-Primer-NG-Final.pdf>.

¹¹ Daniel Leblanc, “Canadian military goes to U.S. for F-35 ceremony despite renewed trade tensions,” *CBC News*, 2 February 2026, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/canada-f-35-lockheed-martin-first-delivery-ceremony-9.7068543>.

¹² Department of National Defence, “Minister McGuinty visits NORAD,” *Government of Canada*, 16 July 2025, <https://www.canada.ca/en/department-national-defence/news/2025/07/minister-mcguinty-visits-norad.html>.

¹³ Prime Minister of Canada, “Prime Minister Carney announces ambitious new plan to defend, build, and transform the North,” *Prime Minister’s Office*, 12 March 2026, <https://www.pm.gc.ca/en/news/news-releases/2026/03/12/prime-minister-carney-announces-ambitious-new-plan-defend-build-and>.

¹⁴ Prime Minister Mackenzie King’s full statement reads as follows: “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.” Quote found in: James Eayrs, *In Defence of Canada: Appeasement and Rearmament* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1965), 183-184.

¹⁵ Nicholas Glesby, “The Canada-United States Permanent Joint Board on Defence (PJBD): An examination of its advice outcomes legacy,” An unpublished thesis in the Faculty of Graduate Studies at the University of Manitoba, 2023, 93-94, <https://mspace.lib.umanitoba.ca/server/api/core/bitstreams/51ce718f-f1dc-4eeb-b8c7-8936aa93d33f/content>.

¹⁶ Lackenbauer, “Permanency, Reassurance, and Quiet Diplomacy: The Permanent Joint Board on Defence (PJBD) at Eighty,” 2.

¹⁷ Christopher Sands, “Giving Offense, Getting the Best Defense? The United States pauses the Permanent Joint Board on Defense.” *US Canada Observer*, 19 May 2026, <https://substack.com/home/post/p-198431445>.

¹⁸ Government of Canada, “The Canada-U.S. Defence Relationship,” *Government of Canada*, 14 December 2016, <https://www.canada.ca/en/news/archive/2014/04/canada-defence-relationship.html>.

¹⁹ Andrea Charron and James Fergusson, *NORAD: In Perpetuity and Beyond* (Montreal/Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2022), <https://www.mqup.ca/Books/N/NORAD3>.

²⁰ U.S. Senate Armed Services Committee, “Statement of General Gregory M. Guillot, United States Air Force Commander, United States Northern Command and North American Aerospace Defense Command,” 13 February 2025, 2, https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/guillot_statement1.pdf.

²¹ Ibid; For more, see: Ryan Dean and P. Whitney Lackenbauer, “Defending the North American Homeland: Reassuring Messaging from the NORAD-USNORTHCOM Perspective,” *North American and Arctic Defence and Security Network*, 12 March 2025, https://www.naadsn.ca/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/25mar-Defending-the-North-American-Homeland_RD-PWL-QI.pdf.