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Canada, the Arctic, NORAD and Allies

Andrea Charron, Ph.D.
NAADSN Co-Lead

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It is a pleasure to be invited to speak with you about the status of the North American Aerospace Defence Command (NORAD), the importance of Nordic allies and cautions relative to the impact on Arctic communities given projected defence investment.

My bottom line up front is simple: Canada has finally committed to a serious, long-term modernization of NORAD and Arctic defence, but the ultimate success of these efforts will depend on sustained political commitment, realistic expectations, and the ability to balance defence investments with the pressing social, economic, and security challenges facing northern communities.

It was only four years ago, [in June 2022](#), that the Government of Canada committed \$38.6 billion over twenty years to a major modernization plan for Canada's and North America's defence, with NORAD at its centre. [NORAD has three missions](#): aerospace warning, aerospace control, and maritime warning. Since its creation in 1957, its principal strategic concern has been the Arctic, which remains the most direct avenue of attack against targets in North America.

In consultation with the United States, the other binational partner in NORAD, five priority lines of effort were identified: domain awareness; command, control, and communications upgrades; modernization of weapons systems; sustainment; and future-proofing.

Advances in missile technology mean that new missile systems launched from Russia, China, and North Korea (the latter to a lesser extent) could strike targets anywhere in North America by travelling over, through, or even beneath the Arctic region. Domain awareness was therefore identified as the first priority. NORAD's only persistent surveillance and early warning capability, the North Warning System, is approaching the end of its service life and lacks the ability to see beyond the horizon. The new capabilities being introduced, however, are designed primarily to project force into the Arctic from the south rather than to maintain a large permanent military presence in the region. The approximately 2,000 members of the [1st Canadian Ranger Patrol Group](#) are

the principal exception. Their role is focused on surveillance, reporting, sovereignty patrols, and support to military and civilian operations rather than warfighting.

In Iqaluit, you will visit one of 3 forward operations locations used by NORAD. As part of the [NORAD Northern Basing initiative](#), dozens and dozens of projects are planned that include airfield upgrades, ensuring dedicated fuel storage, multiplatform hangars, and airfield and aircraft equipment storage. Inuvik in the Yukon and Canadian Forces Base Goose Bay (5 Wing) in Labrador are the priorities for such upgrades given their locations at the western and eastern edges of Canada's Arctic. Iqaluit and Yellowknife are secondary priorities. The plan is not to turn the FOLs into bases but to have support structures in place for surges of activity. Current estimates for the Northern Basing Initiative projects are approximately \$33 million. Since construction in much of the Arctic can only occur during a short summer season, full operational capability is not expected until the late 2030s.

Even though an air threat has been the persistent military threat to the Arctic, Canada has just begun to think about Integrated Air and Missile Defence (IAMD). For two decades, Ottawa maintained its position of non-participation in the United States' Ground-based Midcourse (GMD) ballistic missile defence system (with interceptors in Alaska and California). A significant policy shift occurred following Minister of National Defence [David McGuinty's visit to NORAD on July 15, 2025](#), when Canada formally removed its longstanding restrictions on participation in the air and missile defence of North America.

A new and consequential development that has direct implications for defence of Canada's Arctic is the formalization of memorandums of understanding on defence cooperation with NATO Nordic states especially [Denmark](#) and [Norway](#).

Denmark is particularly important in the near term given that Canada shares a 3,000 km maritime border with the Kingdom of Denmark (Greenland) as well as rich historic and cultural links between the Inuit populations on both sides of the border. The US Pituffik Space Base in Northeastern Greenland is vital to the resupply of Canadian Forces Station Alert on Ellesmere island (Op BOXTOP) and ships in Canada's Northwest Passage that need repair or refueling are dependent on Nuuk. In the future, and given that Denmark is responsible for the defence of Greenland, [a trilateral NORAD](#) is worthy of consideration at some future date assuming political tensions are less fraught. The same aerospace and missile threat path that plagues Canada and the United States also applies to Greenland.

In the case of Norway, a new Canada-Norway MOU is focused on cooperation on space projects with a particular focus on advancing Arctic security and supporting sovereign defence capabilities.

The United States remains a vital partner to NORAD – and NORAD continues to function as it should. Canada will continue to invite individual NATO states with Arctic capabilities to participate in [Op Nanook exercises](#) (which now run all year and have 5 variations) and Canada will continue to support Joint Forces Command Norfolk and Arctic Sentry initiatives.

QUICK IMPACT



While the speed of decision-making and the scale of investment are unprecedented there are reasons for caution. Many of the modernization projects underway today will not achieve full operational capability until the late 2030s, spanning multiple governments and election cycles. Maintaining political support and funding discipline over such a long horizon will be essential.

Equally important is the need to manage expectations regarding the benefits these projects may bring to Arctic communities. Defence spending should not overshadow the more immediate security and safety challenges facing northern residents, including inadequate housing, infrastructure deficits, limited access to clean water, shortages in health-care services—particularly tertiary care in Nunavut—restricted employment opportunities, and the high cost and fragility of fuel and supply chains.

My greatest concern is that the large-scale construction activity associated with Arctic defence modernization could unintentionally magnify existing social pressures. The influx of southern workers into already strained communities may place additional demands on housing, services, and local governance. In particular, there is a real risk that organized crime and illicit drug networks could follow these new economic opportunities northward. If fentanyl and other synthetic opioids gain a foothold in Arctic communities, the consequences could be devastating. As Canada strengthens Arctic defence, it must ensure that community safety, well-being, and resilience advance alongside military capability.

Thank you, and I look forward to the discussion.