



DISARMING ARCTIC SECURITY

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Fighter Aircraft (2): Defence at Home and Abroad

Canadian defence policy is focused on three contexts: i) defending Canada, ii) defending North America, and iii) contributing to international peace and security. Fighter aircraft are not “essential” to Canadian action in any of these contexts.

i) Defending Canada: Air defence is integral to Canadian sovereignty and law enforcement, but that doesn't mean fighter aircraft are integral to air defence. In the officially acknowledged absence of military threats to Canada, monitoring and patrolling Canadian airspace, in the Arctic and in the Canadian south, becomes a military mission in support of a civilian responsibility – for which fighter aircraft are far from optimal.

Air defence is not a luxury that Canada can decide to do without. Any state has a responsibility to monitor its territory and airspace to reinforce respect for its sovereignty and territorial integrity. It is incumbent on any state to know what is going on within its territory in order to credibly assure its people, and notably its neighbors, that there are not undetected activities within or near its own borders that may pose a threat to public safety, the rule of law, or to the security of a neighbor.

A primary need is obviously for surveillance and control of air (and maritime) approaches to Canadian territory. Following the 9/11 attacks in the US, monitoring of internal airspace has also gained prominence. But the air defence requirement is not, it must be repeated, a response to any military threat; rather, the object of such air space monitoring and surveillance is unauthorized civilian aircraft. The airborne threat that Canada faces comes largely in the form of small civilian aircraft carrying contraband. In one prominent case in the 1990s, coastal radars detected and fighter aircraft intercepted a Convair 580 aircraft which had flown non-stop from Colombia. NORAD, the Canada-US aerospace defence cooperation agreement through which air approaches to Canada are monitored, followed the unauthorized Convair to a landing site in northern Québec where the RCMP seized a cocaine shipment with an estimated street price of \$3 billion.¹ The day-to-day activity of NORAD is now in fact primarily to lend aid to the civil authorities in their drug interdiction efforts. Coastal radars identify aircraft entering Canadian airspace without a filed flight plan, and, when necessary, aircraft are sent to identify and escort the intruders to an airport or landing strip where civilian authorities can deal with them.

So it is clear that Canada does need credible air policing commensurate with the level of threat, and that in turn suggests it needs aircraft with the range and speed needed to intercept and escort unauthorized aircraft. But that does not necessarily point to the need for fighter aircraft – they do have speed and considerable range to perform that role, but are they really the best or most cost-effective option? With a range of about 1,200 km (2,400 km roundtrip) and being centrally located

(in Bagotville, Quebec and Cold Lake, Alberta), fighter aircraft obviously need both forward operating bases and inflight fuelling assistance for Arctic patrols and intercepts, and in-flight refueling for Pacific and Atlantic coastal patrols and intercepts. These rather cumbersome and costly arrangements for tracking small civilian aircraft have led some analysts to suggest that a better option might be smaller, slower, and shorter range aircraft much more widely dispersed throughout the country, with a capacity to respond effectively to unidentified and unauthorized intrusions into Canadian airspace?

Earlier in the F-35 debate, a Canadian Forces College professor explored the latter option. He argued that because Canada will not be in a position to buy enough of any fighter aircraft to fulfill all the NORAD, NATO, and expeditionary commitments that could be contemplated and that therefore alternatives to advanced fighters could be considered: “The most likely avenue of attack from the air on Canada today is not from a lumbering Bear bomber, but rather a small privately owned commercial aircraft.” And for defence against that you need aircraft that can fly “low and slow” – not the métier of supersonic fighters. He went on to say: “A turboprop aircraft like Embraer’s “Super Tucano” or Beechcraft’s AT-6B (whose engines are manufactured by Pratt & Whitney Canada in Nova Scotia) would easily fit this bill. At roughly \$6-million per copy, we could outfit the air force with 10 times the number of airframes. Furthermore, such aircraft are well suited to support army operations and are cheap to operate and maintain.”²

Monitoring Canadian airspace is obviously essential. It supports the rule of law, public safety and thus the human security of Canadians, and so ultimately national security. The available evidence indicates that the air defence role in Canada is essentially an air policing role carried out along the Arctic, Pacific, and Atlantic coasts. James Fergusson, a prominent academic defence analyst generally supportive of increased Canadian military capacity, notes that “in the absence of a global struggle such as the Cold War,” Canada “faces few, if any, direct military threats.” Thus, he says, the Canadian Forces at home face primarily a policing challenge, including in the Arctic. Consequently, “there are few, if any, threats that necessitate an advanced multi-role fighter, even with the resumption of Russian bomber flights over the Arctic in the past several years.”³ That is essentially the point made by the former deputy defence minister Charles Nixon, when he said fighter aircraft “cannot contribute anything substantial” toward meeting the six stated objectives of the current Government’s Canada First defence policy.⁴

In an important sense, the Canadian Forces are not now organized to maximize or give priority to their dominant roles in air policing and providing aid to civil authorities. The absence of military threats, now and in the foreseeable future ought to have profound implications for defence planning. Just as the presence of military threats must drive defence planning, the absence of threat ought to be equally consequential for defence planning. Inasmuch as threats to Canadian security point to the need for enhanced Canadian Forces assistance to civil authorities in disaster response capacity, search and rescue, and law enforcement on multiple levels (including in air approaches to Canadian territory), it would obviously be prudent for military planning and procurement to honor those priorities. In the Arctic, for example, as search and rescue and management of the Arctic air and maritime environment move to the fore, the absolutely least helpful way for the Canadian Forces to upgrade their capacity to assist the civilian operations will be to focus on enhancing Canadian combat capabilities in the north. The real need has little to do with traditional military combat capacity, and everything to do with enhancing public safety and the rule of law.

A Canadian air defence requirement does not translate convincingly into a requirement for one of the four or five most complex and most expensive combat aircraft on the planet.

ii) Defending North America: The Arctic remains one of the most promising venues for ongoing cooperation with Russia, despite soured relations in other contexts, but at the same time the nuclear confrontation between the US/NATO and Russia remains a rather prominent vestige of the Cold War that still plays out in Arctic. It may be an anachronistic game, but it's a potentially catastrophic one. In other words, Russian bomber patrols approaching North American air space cannot simply be ignored, but are fifth generation fighter aircraft the answer?

The Cold War is over and Canada and the rest of what was known as “the West” are now partnered with Russia, more or less. While more southerly differences with Russia cannot be entirely cordoned off from the Arctic, ongoing postures of cooperation on oil spill and environmental issues⁵ signal a commitment to shielding the Arctic from southern politics as much as possible. But the nuclear confrontation is clearly not a partnership – it remains real and dangerous, and it still largely defines “east-west” military/strategic relations. Many Russian and American nuclear weapons remain on high alert, capable of firing on targets on either side of that divide within moments of an order to do so. Ballistic missile defence remains a serious problem between them, and even strategic air defence remains confrontational in a *pro forma* sort of way.

And it is of course in the latter, strategic air defence, that Canadian fighter aircraft enter the equation. Russian aircraft still patrol in international airspace near North American territory over the Arctic, Atlantic, and Pacific Oceans, and Canadian and American fighter aircraft still routinely respond. The frequency of Russian strategic bomber flights in the vicinity of North America will be known by NORAD, the bi-lateral Canada-US defence operation with primary responsibility for tracking them, but NORAD doesn't share that information in any comprehensive or systematic way. As noted here before, only fragments of information are available – but enough to get a general sense of the frequency with which Canadian fighter aircraft encounter Russian bombers. Defence Watch by David Pugliese of the Ottawa Citizen has reported on a 2010 NORAD study which said that US and Canadian forces had been facing 12 to 18 Russian flights a year in international air space, noting that the majority of these did not involve interceptions by Canadian aircraft.⁶ That rate of encounters is consistent with the findings of an academic study from 2010⁷ which recounts a 2009 incident in which Canadian fighters intercepted Russian Tupolev Tu-95 “Bear” bombers in international airspace near Canada and quotes Canadian officials as saying this was the 20th such incident in the previous two years. A June 2012 report out of the US Elmendorf-Richardson joint air force and army base in Alaska confirms roughly that frequency of incidents. It shows that from 2006, when Russian patrol flights resumed after a long post-Cold War absence, to the end of 2011, there was an average of nine NORAD intercepts annually of Russian military aircraft, all in international airspace⁸ (but with no indication of how many involved Canadian aircraft).

Norway, which shares a land border with Russia and lies along the only route, over the Barents Sea around Norway's North Cape, by which Russian military aircraft from its western bases can get to either the North Atlantic or the Eastern Arctic – in other words, that represents an area of much more frequent Russian military air traffic, and thus Norway scrambled interceptor jets on 38

occasions in 2009 to identify Russian military aircraft on that route, mainly strategic bombers, on routine training flights – and all in international airspace.⁹ While Norwegian jets on average confirmed Russian aircraft flying in international airspace near Norway three times per month, in Canada it has certainly been less than once per month.

Of course, more recently, the pace of Russian flights has increased significantly – but much more so in the European context than the North American context. CNN reported in February 2015 that NATO jets were scrambled more than 400 times in 2014 to intercept Russian military aircraft, more than a 50 percent increase over 2013.¹⁰ The European Leadership Network,¹¹ produced a Policy Brief¹² identifying what it calls “close military encounters between Russia and the West” during the first eight months of 2014. Of the almost 40 incidents reported, a few were in the Arctic. There were incidents of routine Russian long-range bombers and related aircraft entering US and Canadian air identification zones in international airspace above the Beaufort Sea. Two specific incidents are noted, along with more general references to other flights. In each of the cases cited, American and/or Canadian aircraft responded. The two reported incidents over the Beaufort Sea were also reported by NORAD: On September 18 two Canadian CF-18s intercepted two Russian TU-95 long-range (Bear) bombers “about 75 kilometres off Canada’s Arctic coast.” The Russians were flying “a course in ‘the western reaches’ of Canada’s Air Defence Identification Zone (ADIZ) over the Beaufort Sea.” NORAD made it clear that “the Russian bombers never entered Canada’s sovereign airspace.” Six hours earlier the US scrambled F-22 fighter jets to intercept what was described as a group of Russian aircraft (two MiG-31 fighters, two long-range bombers, and two refuelling tankers). NORAD said at the time that it had “dispatched fighter jets to make contact with Russian long-range bombers ‘in excess of 50 times’ in the last five years” (again, less than once per month). In June 2014 Canadian fighter aircraft were scrambled twice when Russian bombers flew over the Arctic near North American airspace. Government sources told the *Globe and Mail* that in one case the Russian bombers turned back when the Canadian aircraft reached them, and in the other instance the Russians had already veered away before the CF-18s arrived.¹³ In 2010 the Canadian defence minister” told CBC News that Canadian military aircraft intercept between 12 and 18 Russian bombers¹⁴ annually¹⁵ (though that doesn’t mean there are that many separate incidents).

Russian bombers specifically do not enter Canadian or America airspace – indeed, they never have. Arctic sovereignty is not threatened by their flights in international air space. The Russians are doing what they have done for decades and that is flying in international airspace near Canadian and American airspace to announce their presence, train their pilots, and test North American reactions; and the Canadians and Americans, grateful for the opportunity, dutifully “scramble” their fighter aircraft and go out to greet the Russians – announcing NORAD/s presence, training their own pilots, and testing response times.¹⁶ A NORAD spokesperson confirmed in fact that while the incidents of flights had increased, they remained “in keeping with the mission of routine training and exercises.”¹⁷ As NORAD said in 2010, “both Russia and NORAD routinely exercise their capability to operate in the North. These exercises are important to both NORAD and Russia and are not cause for alarm.”¹⁸

But, counter-intuitive as it may be, confronting Soviet or Russian nuclear bomber patrols has not been, and still is not, about defence. It was only for the briefest time in the early 1950s that the US and Canada cooperated in trying to mount a credible defence against Soviet strategic bombers, but after Sputnik and the rise of the intercontinental nuclear missile threat any thought of

comprehensive strategic defence was wisely abandoned. Comprehensive air defence was abandoned and missile defence was largely precluded by the ABM Treaty (which was then foolishly abandoned by the George W. Bush Administration in 2002). Air defence thus became northern early warning in the service of deterrence. NORAD mounted a credible capacity for early warning of nuclear attack, whether by intercontinental ballistic missiles or strategic bombers, not to defend against them, but to signal to the Russians that any such attack would be detected and, under deterrence doctrine, would trigger an immediate counter-attack. Mutually assured destruction, not defence, was and remains the strategy – because no credible defence is in fact possible. Fighter aircraft faithfully heading out to greet Russian bombers on training runs do not represent a defence capability or intent. Indeed, in the macabre world of nuclear deterrence, even the pursuit of strategic defence is destabilizing and antithetical to disarmament – as the BMD stand-off between the US and Russia demonstrates.

So, while Canada needs an ongoing and credible domestic air defence capability, that most certainly does not, and is not intended to, include a combat capacity against nuclear armed Russian bombers. There needs to be a capacity to detect and identify Russian nuclear bombers when they approach North America, but a nuclear war cannot be fought to anyone's advantage so that's not the mission. So defence against Russian bombers is not the point.

Russian bombers will no doubt continue with their occasional sorties along North American coasts, but Canada neither has, nor should it aspire to, an effective defence against them. Russian bombers are not a reason or justification for Canadian fighter aircraft.

iii) Promoting International Peace and Security: Canada obviously has interests and responsibilities beyond the frontiers of North America and thus it has a strategic interest in contributing to international community efforts to promote stability and peace in a troubled world. But are Libya and Iraq the compelling models for how that should be pursued? Or should Canada focus its overseas military contributions on assistance to civilian peacebuilding in the same way that its domestic military operations throughout Canada, including in the Arctic, are focused primarily on aid to the civil authority?

Threats beyond Canada's borders most certainly indicate that we do live in an uncertain world, one that includes extraordinary economic disparities, diverse political systems, failed and failing states, civil wars, globalized terrorism by state and non-state actors, and international criminal networks. Economic disparity and unequal access to resources fuel local and regional tensions, the proliferation of armaments from small arms to weapons of mass destruction exacerbate them, and unresponsive political systems (too often propped up militarily and politically by Western governments) deny legitimate dissent and frustrate the pursuit of political consensus. Globalization means that disparities, instability, extremism, and other strains on peace and stability in faraway places can deliver significant consequences to our own shores.

The recent Libyan and current Iraqi/Syrian interventions are regularly cited as confirming the need for fighter aircraft in responding to failed states, regional conflict, and terrorism. That they play a role is undeniable, but that doesn't constitute evidence that air attacks on troubled and conflicted societies are an effective response to state failure and entrenched conflict, that they offer effective means of protecting vulnerable civilians in the context of violent conflict, or that they support

political processes by which the disputes at the roots of these conflicts can be addressed. Furthermore, even if the Government prefers to argue that there are circumstances in which intervention by fighter aircraft can be both relevant and effective, it does not follow that this is the role for which Canada should be preparing. Canada, like most states, will never have the means to develop and sustain a full range of military capabilities. Inevitably, Canada will have the capacity to do some things beyond the borders of North America, but not others. So we necessarily have to make decisions that will support certain future roles and responses but will preclude others.

The primary responsibility is to acquire military capabilities that serve Canadian domestic security needs, and it is those capabilities that then determine the nature of the contributions that Canada will be in a position to make in international missions. In other words, whatever aircraft Canada acquires for domestic air patrol duties should be the aircraft that could be made available to support Canadian participation in overseas military missions. Not only is that an important basic principle, it is also a practical advantage. If Fighter aircraft are not essential for the defence of Canada or the defence of North America, neither are they optimal for contributing to peace support operations overseas.

The best evidence of the irrelevance of fighter aircraft to military peace support operations beyond our borders is to be found in their infrequent and less than successful deployments overseas. Such aircraft played no role in Canada's most extensive overseas military operation, Afghanistan. Indeed, in more than three decades of operations, Canada's CF-18 fighters have been deployed beyond Canada's borders on only seven occasions:¹⁹ Most of these deployments were not for peace support but for war-fighting operations in which Canadian participation was far from decisive – notably the 1991 Gulf War, the 1999 NATO bombing campaign in Serbia over Kosovo, the 2011 bombing campaign in Libya, and the current bombing in Iraq and Syria. Canadian fighter aircraft were in non-combat patrols in Bosnia in 1997 and 1998 and in 2014, operating from a base in Romania, Canadian fighter aircraft were part of NATO's show of air power in response to the Ukraine crisis.

The 1991 Desert Storm operation accomplished the expulsion of Iraq from Kuwait, and in 1999 Serbia was effectively expelled from Kosovo, though the conflict and its consequences are still far from settled. The Libya, Iraqi, and Syrian bombing runs by CF-18s and others are far less persuasive.

The most effective multilateral military operations have proven to be in contexts of basic political cohesion in which the enforcement function focuses on controlling spoilers – in other words in UN peace support operations rather than in coalition war-fighting roles. The distinction between the two is crucial. Peace support operations are designed as a broad range of civilian and military arrangements that facilitate or support the political resolution of a conflict, while war-fighting is designed to override politics by dint of force and to impose particular political outcomes. And while military attacks readily defeat centralized regimes, as in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya, they are largely powerless in imposing prescribed political outcomes or determining what follows in their wake. All operations in situations of violent conflict are uncertain, but focusing on supporting and building up UN capacity to restrain violence, protect civilians, and support peace efforts is an appropriate role for Canada. Peace support operations under the UN, like most military operations in Canada, are focused on military aid to civil authorities. They do not engage sophisticated fighter aircraft, and furthermore, law enforcement, control of spoilers, and surveillance patrols are not best done at high altitudes and

high speeds. War operations, as in the Gulf and Kosovo, and as the NATO operation became in Libya, are not contemplated outside of major, inevitably US-led, coalitions in which the Canadian component is far from essential. Prof. Dan Middlemiss of Dalhousie University, one of Canada's foremost defence academics concludes that

“in future operations in support of Canadian foreign policy it will become increasingly difficult to justify the cost of a modest fleet of JSFs (joint strike fighters – F-35) for the air force. There would be almost no requirement for such aircraft to support Canadian naval or army deployments on a ‘stand-alone’ basis, and, while they would be useful – and fully interoperable – augmenters to coalition forces, their high acquisition and sustainment costs (which would include the sky-rocketing cost of “subsidies” to attract and retain fighter pilots) might rule them out as cost-effective contributors to Canadian expeditionary operations.”

He points to the importance of information, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) capabilities and suggests further investigation of unpiloted aircraft for that role.²⁰

Canada certainly has responsibilities beyond its borders to contribute to international peace and stability and to protection of vulnerable civilians, but Canada cannot contribute across the broad range of civilian and military tasks involved. Specialization is essential. And given that there is a surfeit of states with fighter aircraft, there is no compelling need for Canada to add more if they are not essential domestically. There are only some things that Canada can do. It has wisely invested in tactical and strategic airlift capacity – a specialization that it puts to good use in Canada, including in and for the Arctic, and in particular situations beyond our borders, like the Nepal earthquake response.

Notes

¹ Canadian Aerospace Sovereignty: In Pursuit of a Comprehensive Capability
by/par Maj François Malo
<http://fas.org/news/canada/0056.htm>

² Paul T. Mitchell, “How to get more air force for the dollar,” *The Ottawa Citizen*, 12 October 2010.
http://www.ottawacitizen.com/story_print.html?id=3655573&sponsor=

³ James Fergusson, “The right debate: airpower, the future of war, Canadian strategic interests, and the JSF decision,” *Canadian Foreign Policy Journal*, 17:3, 204-216.

⁴ Charles Nixon, “Canada does not need fighter jets, period,” *The Globe and Mail*, 08 July 2014.
<http://www.theglobeandmail.com>

⁵ Bradley Klapper, “Despite tensions, US, Russia vow cooperation in the Arctic,” Associated Press, 24 April 2015.
news.yahoo.com

⁶ David Pugleise, “Selling Canada on the need for fighters,” *Ottawa Citizen*, 12 December 2010.
<http://www2.canada.com/ottawacitizen/news/story.html?id=581f5e63-5feb-4983-9d70-f2d8cd0cc4fa&p=2>

⁷ Nancy Teeple, “A Brief History of Intrusions Into the Canadian Arctic,” *Canadian Army Journal*, Vol. 12.3 (Winter 2010), pp. 45-68.

⁸ The report, made available through an access to information request, is not clear on where these intercepts occurred or who carried them out.

⁹ Thomas Nilsen, "NATO fighters scrambled 38 times in 2009," *Barents Observer*, 25 January 2010. <http://barentsobserver.com/en/sections/articles/nato-fighters-scrambled-38-times-2009>

¹⁰ Mick Krever, "Norway: 'We are faced with a different Russia'," CNN, 26 February 2015. <http://www.cnn.com>

¹¹ A network of former military and civilian leaders devoted to promoting European cooperation and addressing security challenges.

¹² "Dangerous Brinkmanship: Close Military Encounters Between Russia and the West in 2014," European Leadership Network, Policy Brief, November 2014. <http://www.europeanleadershipnetwork.org/medialibrary/2014/11/05/3b2f357f/Dangerous%20Brinkmanship.pdf>

¹³ Steven Chase, "Russia's Arctic flybys a – strategic message," *Globe and Mail*, 19 June 2014. www.theglobeandmail.com/news/

¹⁴ The inconsistency of these numbers is notable. Twelve to 18 intercepts by Canada alone works out to a lot more than 50 over five years.

¹⁵ "Canadian fighter jets intercept Russian bombers in Arctic," CBC News, 19 September 2014. www.cbc.ca/news/.

¹⁶ The real question is whether the Russians routinely announce their flights in advance. Concerning a 2009 incident, the Russian Embassy in Ottawa said "the adjacent countries were informed of the flight in good time," but Ottawa said it was not informed. "Russia Denies Bomber Approached Canadian Airspace," CBC News, 27 February 2009. <http://www.cbc.ca/canada/story/2009/02/27/arctic-russia.html?ref=rss>.

¹⁷ Elizabeth Kreft, "NORAD Confirms 'Spike in Activity' Regarding Russian Bombers and US Air Defence Zones," *The Blaze*, 07 August 2014. <http://www.theblaze.com/stories/2014/08/07/norad-confirms-spike-in-activity-regarding-russian-bombers-and-u-s-air-defense-zones-guess-how-close-theyre-coming/>

¹⁸ "NORAD downplays Russian bomber interception," CBC News, 25 August 2010. <http://www.cbc.ca/canada/story/2010/08/25/cf-18s-russians-airspace.html>.

¹⁹ As documented by Dan Middlemiss in "A Military in Support of Canadian Foreign Policy: Some Fundamental Considerations," Centre For Foreign Policy Studies, Dalhousie University, Halifax, Nova.

²⁰ Dan Middlemiss, "A Military in Support of Canadian Foreign Policy: Some Fundamental Considerations."