



DISARMING ARCTIC SECURITY

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When Bears Still Fly: Responding to Russian Bomber Patrols in the Arctic

Russia's Bear Bombers continue to conduct patrols and training flights in international airspace near North America's Arctic coastlines. Canadian and American military interceptor aircraft as part of their own training regimen, continue to track and rendezvous with the Russian Bears. Some observers try to muster alarm in the face of Vladimir Putin's strategic patrols, others are more sanguine, but it is for Governments to devise the appropriate response. NORAD is maddeningly coy about the frequency of such encounters, but as more information emerges, most recently in the 2016 Arctic Yearbook, it becomes increasingly clear that the prudent posture is to be attentive but not alarmed.

The 2010 posture of NORAD (the Canada/US North American Aerospace Defence Agreement), that "both Russia and NORAD routinely exercise their capability to operate in the North," and that "the exercises are important to both NORAD and Russia and are not cause for alarm,"¹ should still hold true, but for some, Crimea changed everything.

Veteran journalist and analyst Matthew Fisher, for example, excoriated Foreign Affairs Minister Stéphane Dion for his plans to pivot Canada toward better relations with Russia in the North,² arguing that Arctic relations between the region's two most prominent states should not be separated from what Fisher called Russia's "poisonous" relationship with the West over Ukraine, the Baltics, and the Middle East.³ And while Foreign Minister Dion sensibly says "the north is no place for military confrontation or buildup,"⁴ others, like a former head of the US Northern Command, still see peril and a risky military "capability gap" in the Arctic.⁵

Of course, any credible assessment of the extent and nature of a northern military capability gap needs to be based on a clear understanding of the nature and magnitude of the threat. And when it comes to apparent current and foreseeable levels of Russian bomber activity in the general vicinity of the northern coasts of North America, judged against current air defence capabilities, it's hard to make the case for a capability gap.

First, the Russian bomber flights near North American coast lines always have and still do take place in international airspace. The territorial boundaries of Canada or the US are not, and have not been, breached (indeed, if Russian military aircraft were to enter Canadian air space without permission that would most certainly be regarded as a gravely hostile act).

Second, there are rather few, indeed very few, Russian flights near the North American Arctic coasts, or near eastern and western coasts in the North Pacific or North Atlantic – the numbers are especially low compared with the number of NATO flights near the Russian Arctic or its western frontier in Europe.

As reported here in the past,⁶ Russian bomber aircraft, occasionally accompanied by fighters and refueling aircraft, show up near the northern frontiers of Canada and North America less than once a month. In 2010 NORAD suggested a higher rate – namely, that US and Canadian forces had been facing 12 to 18 Russian flights a year in international air space, noting that most of these did not involve interceptions by Canadian aircraft. An academic study from 2010 quoted Canadian officials as saying there had been 20 incidents involving Russian Tupolev Tu-95 “Bear” bombers in international airspace near Canada in the previous two years. Then a June 2012 report out of the US Elmendorf-Richardson joint air force and army base in Alaska showed 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 airspace (again, with no indication of how many involved Canadian aircraft).

A new study by two Laval University academics, Frédéric Lasserre and Pierre-Louis Têtu, included in the just released *2016 Arctic Yearbook*,⁷ compares several studies on “the number of intercepts of Russian warplanes by NATO fighter planes” since 1992. Most of that data (primarily in three studies) focuses on the period from 2006 (when Russia’s post-Cold War flights resumed) to 2014, and it shows an average of 8 intercepts per year (an intercept being to fly alongside the target aircraft, in all these cases in international air space, to visually identify the Russian aircraft and to let the Russians know they are being watched).

These are routine events and not on their own a sign of building tensions in the Arctic. Indeed, indications are that Russian flights in the Arctic may sometimes, as training flights, have been unarmed, and all took place at normal high altitudes, indicating they were making no effort to go undetected. Furthermore, the situation in the Arctic is dramatically different from the number of intercepts carried out in Europe, in the Baltics region, and in international air space near Japan – each of those regions involving several hundred per year according to the Laval study. NATO military aircraft have also dramatically increased their patrol flights close to Russian borders, eliciting in turn large numbers of Russian interceptions of NATO aircraft – for example, a Russian study indicates that NATO flights over the Baltic and Barents Seas near Russia, to which the Russians feel obliged to respond, have grown to about 10 per week.⁸

As Lasserre and Têtu conclude, it is fair to interpret Russian patrols and NORAD intercepts around the North American Arctic, not as signs of growing tensions, but as reflecting “the desire not to lose operational capacity and, above all, as a political tool designed to display capability, rather than the sign of a renewed aggressiveness in the Arctic.”⁹

In other words, Russia has clearly not included the Arctic in the stepped up military operations elsewhere that reflect a sharp increase in tensions between Russia and the West, and it is important that Canada and the US not be the ones to import the tensions of other regions into the Arctic – hence, Foreign Minister Dion’s sensible assertion that “the north is no place for military confrontation or buildup.”

That raises the question of what it means to be attentive, but not alarmed? Attention must obviously be paid to military air traffic within the region, but notwithstanding the interests of some in hyping the air threat so as to bolster support for the acquisition of “fifth generation” fighter aircraft, NORAD generally has not been drawn to alarmist responses. In fact, NORAD does not insist on direct interceptions of all the Russian Bear bombers that enter into the air defence identification zones (in international air space) monitored by NORAD. According to the Laval study, the Pentagon has even considered ending routine intercepts of such aircraft.¹⁰

At the same time, of course, NORAD remains very active in training exercises meant to promote air defence capacity in the Arctic. Whether operations like Vigilant Shield,¹¹ Polar Roar,¹² and Amalgam Dart,¹³ among others, are more or less than prudence requires, can be debated, but it’s clear that the Russian military patrols in international airspace near North American frontiers are neither a challenge to sovereignty nor a cause for alarm.

Notes

¹ “NORAD downplays Russian bomber interceptions,” CBC News, 25 August, 2010, cbc.ca

² Marie-Danielle Smith, “Trudeau government announces ‘rational’ shift in Arctic policy, will seek to work with Russia,” *National Post*, 01 October 2016. www.nationalpost.com

³ Matthew Fisher, “Canada’s dreamers ignore Russian aggression and offer Putin an olive branch instead,” *National Post*, 10 October 2016. www.nationalpost.com

⁴ Marie-Danielle Smith, “Trudeau government announces ‘rational’ shift in Arctic policy, will seek to work with Russia,” *National Post*, 01 October 2016. www.nationalpost.com

⁵ Matthew Fisher, “Fourth-generation Super Hornets just can’t do the job in the Arctic, retired US Air Force general insists,” *National Post*, 04 July 2016. www.nationalpost.com

⁶ Ernie Regehr, “Fighter Aircraft (2): Defence at Home and Abroad,” *The Simons Foundation*, *Disarming Arctic Security*, 18 June 2015. <http://www.thesimonsfoundation.ca/projects/disarming-arctic-security-briefing-papers>

⁷ Frédéric Lasserre and Pierre-Louis Têtu, “Russian Air Patrols in the Arctic: Are Long-Range Bomber Patrols a Challenge to Canadian Security and Sovereignty?” *2016 Arctic Yearbook*, Edited by Lassi Heininen of the University of Lapland, and by Managing Editors, Heather Exner-Pirot of the University of Saskatchewan and Joël Plouffe of École nationale d’Administration publique (ENAP – Montréal). <http://arcticyearbook.com>

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Vigilant Shield is an annual Canada-US exercise to practice joint responses to various scenarios positing threats to North America, including in the high Arctic. This year’s exercise involved the deployment of Canadian CF-18s to Inuvik and American F-15s to Yellowknife. Chris Thatcher, “NORAD exercise puts defence of norther airspace to the test,” *SKIES*, 26 October 2016. <http://skiesmag.com>

¹² Polar Roar is a US Strategic Command exercise that this year involved B-52 and B-2 bomber training flights to the Arctic, Northern Pacific, and the Baltic Sea, testing their “long-range global-strike capability.” Canadian CF-18 aircraft, along with other American aircraft, trained in intercept and safe passage procedures as part of the overall exercise, according to NORAD. David Pugliese, “US shows off its strategic muscle with bomber flights to Arctic and Baltic Sea, CF-18s involved,” *Ottawa Citizen*, 01 August 2016. <http://ottawacitizen.com>

¹³ Amalgam Dart is a NORAD training exercise in aerospace detection and defence. This year’s operation involved Canadian and American aircraft (fighter aircraft, air-to-air refuelling tankers, and AWACS airborne warning and control aircraft) operating out of Canadian forward operating locations and US air bases in Alaska, as well as a mobile radart system out of Resolute.