

# U.S.-CANADIAN SECURITY COOPERATION IS CRITICAL TO ACHIEVING A STABLE ARCTIC

PART ONE IN A THREE-PART SERIES ON THE NORTH AMERICAN ARCTIC

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*This series examines security issues in the North American Arctic from three regional perspectives: the Northern Pacific, the U.S.-Canada defense relationship, and the North Atlantic. Looking northward from the United States, these sub-regions are situated at roughly the 10, 12, and 2 o'clock positions, respectively. This conceptualization reflects the primary threat vectors to the North American homeland perceived by U.S. Northern Command (USNORTHCOM) and the North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD). We have thus adopted this framework for this series of Executive Briefs on potential sources of instability in the North American Arctic and strategies to mitigate them in coordination with U.S. allies and partners.*

Eighty years ago, allied forces landed at Normandy in a first step toward liberating Europe from Nazi domination. In today's era of growing nationalist sentiment, it is important to remember that the Americans were not alone on those Normandy beaches. Of the five code-named landing areas, the Americans led the assault at Omaha and Utah, the United Kingdom spearheaded the landings at Gold and Sword, and the Canadians led the way at Juno. Only through coordinated military and intelligence efforts could the allies establish the beachhead that would prove a decisive step toward German surrender.

After the war, the United States and Canada enjoyed an increasingly close defense partnership. Together, these two nations represented a quarter of the founding members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), and they would go on to establish the world's only binational command: NORAD. However, the relationship between these two countries is now at a crossroads. The United States perceives an increasingly complex global security environment, and it is challenged to balance the requirements associated with defending the North American homeland, deterring conflict in the Indo-Pacific region, and maintaining stability in Europe in the face of Russian aggression. As a result, the United States has expressed heightened expectations of its allies and partners to contribute more to international security efforts, including Canada.

After a 2025 election season in which foreign and defense policy played an outsized role, Canada now recognizes that it must do more to support international security efforts and protect its sovereignty. Given increasingly assertive adversaries and an increasingly unpredictable relationship with the United States, Prime Minister Carney understands that Canada is increasingly vulnerable, particularly in the Arctic. As a result, the Canadian government has



determined it will immediately add roughly US\$6.8 billion to its defense budget.<sup>1</sup> Carney also has pledged that Canada will dedicate at least two percent of its GDP to defense by March of 2026—a significant acceleration of previously announced defense spending plans.<sup>2</sup> These resources will enable Canada to invest in soldiers and equipment, build up its defense industrial base (potentially in partnership with the European Union), and add drones and sensors to monitor the Arctic seafloor. The Carney Government is also considering moving the Canadian Coast Guard to the Department of National Defence (DND) as a way to make its defense posture more robust over the near term.<sup>3</sup>

These moves, among other possibilities highlighted in the chart below, reflect a new reality in U.S.-Canadian relations and raise fundamental questions about the U.S.-Canada defense partnership in the Arctic. This brief posits that both countries desire stability in the region and contends that maintaining and enhancing bilateral security cooperation is the best way forward, given the clear advantages of leveraging the unique, existing structures of the defense relationship. It assumes that defense in the North American Arctic is a shared responsibility and that the U.S.-Canada defense relationship remains durable, functional, and capable of protecting both countries' overlapping interests effectively despite ongoing tensions in their bilateral relationship, as illustrated by the White House's threat on July 10, 2025 to impose a 35 percent tariff on more than half of Canada's exports to the United States.<sup>4</sup>

Setting aside current political and economic tensions, this approach builds on decades of trust developed through formalized coordination processes and joint execution; respects Canadian sovereignty; leverages Canada's unique geography and its intent to expand defense efforts; and supports ongoing U.S. commitments to strengthen hemispheric defense, deter competitors, and preserve stability in the North American Arctic.

## **A STRATEGY FOR ENHANCING U.S.-CANADA SECURITY COOPERATION**

This framework for enhanced U.S.-Canada security cooperation “starts with why—a clearly defined objective or the “ends” of a defense strategy. The United States and Canada have shared national interests in preserving stability in the North American Arctic, protecting American and Canadian territory, and defending their economic interests in the region.

As the region has become more accessible, the Arctic has become increasingly important as an arena for strategic competition, as China and Russia expand military activities in the region, separately and together, that pose escalating threats to North American security and homeland defense. Russian naval and bomber deployments near Alaska, joint Sino-Russian exercises off the U.S. coast, increased Russian operations near Canadian airspace, and Chinese dual-use research activities in the region all illustrate the rising threat level in what was historically a relatively uncontested Arctic. Gray zone tactics, cyber warfare, and the proliferation of small uncrewed aircraft and undersea systems further contribute to growing instability in the region. Rapidly retreating sea ice is opening Arctic

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<sup>1</sup> Austen, Ian, “Canada Commits Billions in Military Spending to Meet NATO Target,” *The New York Times*, June 9, 2025.

<sup>2</sup> Ahmadi, Ali Abbas, “Canada pledges to meet NATO’s 2% defense spending target with a year,” *BBC News*, June 9, 2025.

<sup>3</sup> Nardi, Christopher, “Liberals considering arming the Coast Guard amid significant pivot towards new security mandate,” *National Post*, June 9, 2025.

<sup>4</sup> Lynch, David J., Coletta, Amanda, and Vinall, Frances. “Trump threatens 35 percent tariffs on Canada in latest trade war twist,” *The Washington Post*, July 11, 2025.



waters, leading to increased maritime traffic—including both military patrols and commercial shipping—and heightened interest in exploiting critical minerals and rare earth elements essential to the defense industry. Without a stronger presence, or at least a capacity to monitor these developments, the North American Arctic could face increasing encroachment and destabilization.

Moving on to the “ways” of this framework, how will the United States and Canada most efficiently and effectively maintain stability in the Arctic? Broadly speaking, the U.S. Department of Defense (DOD) views the “how” as deterrence by denial. NORAD embodies the long-standing, shared commitment of the United States and Canada to monitor, patrol, and protect the aerospace domains and maritime approaches to U.S. and Canadian sovereign territory.

In addition to NORAD, another important, though less widely recognized, mechanism for enhancing U.S.-Canadian defense cooperation is the Permanent Joint Board of Defense (PJBD). The PJBD serves as the primary strategic forum for bilateral defense dialogue and high-level policy coordination. As the U.S.-Canada relationship undergoes a reset, this presents an ideal opportunity to reassess the PJBD and adapt it to the current strategic and operating environment.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR MOVING FORWARD

Means refer to the specific resources or capabilities that enable the achievement of strategic objectives. In the context of U.S. and Canadian defense cooperation, the primary focus for leveraging Canadian comparative advantage will be taking advantage of Canada’s geography to strengthen the North American defense posture.

A quick review of Canada’s hard power capabilities reveals its polar icebreaker fleet as another potential comparative advantage. Collaborative efforts through NORAD present additional opportunities to build on areas of relative Canadian strength. For example, the Canadian Coast Guard’s Arctic and Offshore Patrol Vessels (AOPV) provide a unique asset that could be deployed to fill gaps in U.S. capabilities, particularly with respect to NORAD’s maritime surveillance mission.<sup>5</sup> These could be used to project presence, monitor, and patrol the region if U.S. forces based in Alaska (but assigned to U.S. Indo-Pacific Command) are deployed for a contingency in Asia.

The United States and Canada could also develop pathways to strategically invest the approximately US\$27 billion that Canada funded for NORAD modernization to bolster Canadian capabilities. Canadian “quick wins” could include procuring air refueling assets to co-deploy with the United States. Longer-term Canadian investments could target position, navigation, and timing (PNT) requirements, seabed infrastructure, and dual-use undersea sensors, or its own SATCOM capabilities to potentially create redundancies in the system, as described below in Figure 1.

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<sup>5</sup> Lajeunesse, Adam and Woityra, William, “The USCG Arctic Presence: Leveraging Canada’s AOPV Design,” *Canadian Maritime Security Network: iDEAS Series*, September 2024.



**Figure 1. Potential Canadian Defense Investments**

Domain	Subcategory	Current US Contribution	Ally Reliance Level	Ally Capability without US	Criticality to Joint Ops	Recommendations if US Draws Down
SPACE	SATCOM	MUOS, AEHF, wideband support	HIGH	LOW	CRITICAL	Invest in sovereign SATCOM or long-term shared access agreements with encrypted capabilities
SPACE	PNT	GPS provision and precision augmentation	HIGH	LOW	CRITICAL	Partner with EU Galileo; invest in ground-based backup systems
CYBER	OT/Infrastructure Defense	US tools and monitoring via NORAD/NORTHCOM networks	MED	MED	HIGH	Expand joint threat hunting, AI-based anomaly detection
AIR	Strategic Airlift	C-17s, global mobility infrastructure	HIGH	MED	HIGH	Expand airlift fleet or co-deploy w/ US for regional operations
AIR	Aerial Refueling	KC-135, KC-46 fleet access	HIGH	LOW	CRITICAL	Procure refueling assets; co-deploy with US
AIR	Arctic Over the Horizon Radar	US historically has invested in OTHR	HIGH	LOW	CRITICAL	Canadian \$4 billion investment (JORN)
LAND	Arctic Force Posture	Arctic prepositioning, training, and heavy equipment	HIGH	MED	HIGH	Expand Rangers program, invest in Arctic mobility & shelters
LAND	Bulk Fuel Delivery	DLA-managed barge delivery of JP8 and diesel to remote Arctic sites, seasonal barge to resupply NWS sites	HIGH	LOW	CRITICAL	Develop CAF-led logistics corps w/ Arctic delivery capacity; expand joint contracts with regional firms
LAND	Strategic Rail (Alberta – AK)	US investment interest, support for cross-border permits, strategic framing under Defense Production Act and Arctic Infrastructure policy	HIGH	Low	HIGH	Canada to prioritize Arctic rail corridor under defense and critical infrastructure strategy; est joint logistics agreements and align permitting with US DOD, N&NC needs
SEA	Undersea Surveillance (SOSUS)	US undersea sensing arrays, cueing for ASW operations	HIGH	LOW	HIGH	Partner on seabed infrastructure and dual-use undersea sensors

On the policy side, both countries could agree to strengthen and elevate the PJBD to reflect growing political attention on the U.S.-Canada relationship. This annual meeting has recently been led by an Assistant Secretary on the U.S. side and a Member of Parliament on the Canadian side. However, the U.S. Undersecretary of Defense for Policy (USD/P) and his Canadian counterpart could chair the next annual PJBD meeting to demonstrate the importance of the relationship. Rather than being a superficial one-day tour d’horizon, the PJBD could focus on a few key defense priorities such as the Arctic—an approach the Ted Stevens Center would be well-suited to support. Additionally, the PJBD could begin meeting at least semi-annually to ensure regular, high-level coordination.

The PJBD could also focus on developing innovative, whole-of-government efforts that would strengthen North American Arctic security. For example, since Canada is a leader in the global mining industry, it could work with the United States—and possibly other allies—on developing uranium and other key minerals used in defense platforms and modern energy and communication systems.<sup>6</sup> These discussions could also focus on Canada establishing innovative programs to fund defense in the Arctic, including through a proposed Center of Excellence model that could streamline investment in dual-use infrastructure and attract outside investment.<sup>7</sup> The countries could also establish a defense research consortium in areas such as artificial intelligence or critical minerals stockpiling. Further, the two sides could develop a shared counter-lawfare strategy for the Arctic, including for the maritime domain, using lessons from the South China Sea and other regions. Finally, and most importantly, Canada and the United States could discuss what it would take to change Canadian defense policy to undo the standing prohibition

<sup>6</sup> Sukhankin, Sergey, “A Fork In The Road: As Bifurcation Hits The Global Uranium Industry, The Secure Path Leads To Canada,” *Macdonald Laurier Institute Commentary*, May 7, 2025.

<sup>7</sup> Todd, Kate E., “We need a Center of Excellence and Concessionary Finance Program to Facilitate Multipurpose Canadian Arctic Defense Infrastructure Development,” *Arctic360 Blog*, visited June 5, 2025.



on DND participation in ballistic missile defense efforts, which will likely be critical to realizing the Trump Administration’s vision for a “Golden Dome” for North America.

The current moment represents an opportunity to improve the U.S.-Canada defense relationship despite the ongoing turmoil in the political relationship. However, we must acknowledge the obvious constraints to transforming this security relationship. While Canada is the United States’ primary strategic partner in the North American Arctic, the United States far outweighs Canada in population, economic size, and defense expenditures. The United States must press for fair burden shifting while remaining realistic about what Canada can do. However, politicians and policymakers on both sides of the border should be encouraged by history. For example, Canada funded most of the Gordie Howe Bridge because the Detroit-Windsor crossing trade route is critical to its economy. A similar investment in defense is possible—but it will require sustained political will, strategic alignment, and a shared recognition that Arctic security is no longer optional. It is essential to the defense of a shared North American homeland.

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