

Canadian Defence: Time For a New Mindset

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Introduction

This series of papers is intended to contribute to a discussion in Canada over what are, arguably, two of the most important defence policy developments since the end of World War 2. The first of these is Canada's decision to meet and then far exceed NATO's 2% defence budget guideline, possibly going as high as 5% of GDP by 2035 for defence and defence-related spending. In itself, this decision would be an extremely important moment for Canadian defence policy. Secondly, these defence spending increases come at a time when President Trump is fundamentally calling into question bedrock assumptions about Canada-US relations and about the future of America's commitment to institutions such as NATO. Taken together, these two developments make this truly a watershed moment. Decisions made in Canada over the next few years about equipment purchases and participation in defence projects and alliances will set the stage for decades to come as to what kind of a military power Canada will be and how our foreign policy, which defence is meant to support, will evolve.

There are four papers published here, with the fifth as an epilogue. The first paper deals with Canada's acquisition of the F35 fighter and examines it in the context of the Canadian military's traditional worldview that seamless interoperability with the US military is the key to the Canadian Armed Forces' continued viability. The paper argues that this worldview is now questionable and that the advisability of committing fully to the F35 should be re-examined in this light. The second paper looks at the proposed acquisition of up to 12 new submarines in the context of what kind of Navy, and larger Armed Forces, this will give us. The argument is made that we will be acquiring a level of military lethality Canadians are not used to thinking about when they picture their place in the world and that we need to start thinking about the implications of this. The third paper looks at Canada's possible participation in Trump's Golden Dome missile defence project. Drawing on the experience of the last two times we were asked to participate in an American missile defence project, under Presidents Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush, this paper argues that we need to abandon dogmatism and find a flexible way to approach this issue; saying yes to elements of the Golden Dome that make sense for us, and no those which don't (and which probably won't be built after Trump leaves office anyway). The final paper takes a renewed look at Canada's extensive Cold War involvement with nuclear weapons, something most Canadians

today are not aware of, and asks if Donald Trump's threats to no longer defend NATO will lead the European nations to work together to develop some version of their own deterrent. If they did so, what would Canada's response be?

These papers begin from a premise that Canada stands on the verge of a very new era in terms of its defence policy. Doing, and spending, the bare minimum required to get by as a minor contributor to NATO and NORAD will no longer be enough. The world is moving in ways which will require us to do much more. Part of this has to do with threats from a revanchist Russia, an aggressive China which is rapidly emerging as a great economic and military power, and other threats in regions like the Middle East. But, arguably, an even larger part of it has to do with the fact that the United States is no longer the benign hegemon and partner we have comfortably relied on since 1945. Not only must we find our way to make a credible contribution to confronting the threats out there, we must do so at a moment when the bedrock of our perception of the world – that the US would lead the “Western world,” and that its fundamental objectives would be consistent with our own – no longer necessarily holds. It may even be the case that the US itself will somehow be a “threat” of some kind to Canada in the coming years – perhaps not militarily, but at least in terms of taking a view of economic competition which undercuts fundamental assumptions we have made about free trade and mutual prosperity for decades. Or, it may simply be the case that the US, exhausted and battered by its internal political and economic dysfunction, will double down on Trump's policies. This does not necessarily mean that the US will limp off the world stage, but rather that it will take an ever more unilateral approach to defining its interests and pursuing them. This will force the remaining democratic countries to find a way to band together to confront their challenges.

In the face of this, these papers argue the following four points.

First, Canada's military worldview is going to need to change fundamentally and the Canadian Armed Forces, as an institution, will likely resist this, at least at first. The debate over the F35 shows that the military, and especially the Air Force in this case, still views seamless “interoperability” with the US as the cornerstone of its own purpose and existence. Decades of close work with the US armed forces will not be erased from institutional memory overnight. High level political oversight is going to be required to force the senior levels of Canada's military to pivot away from overwhelming physical and psychological

reliance on the US as the natural ally and leader. This statement does *not* mean that we will cease to collaborate with the US military. The defence of North America will remain an area of close bilateral cooperation. But it does mean that other international interests and tasks will require us to work just as closely with other partners in contexts where we believe our interests require a Canadian military contribution, but the US does not decide to go as well. It has heretofore been impossible for us to imagine that we might take part in a serious and sustained military operation abroad which the US did not lead, or at least support. We are going to have to get over this and start thinking about what such involvements might look like and how we are going to achieve them, both militarily and diplomatically.

This leads to the second major argument of these papers; variable geometry is going to be real and it's not going to be easy. We must begin to consider how new partnerships will work in practice. How would we contribute seriously to the defence of our allies in Europe if the US stepped back from NATO? Such a thing would have been considered impossible a few years ago. It is not now. If Canada comes to the conclusion that we must remain part of European defence, for reasons of promoting trade links which can help to mitigate the end of free trade with the US, for example, how would we do it? What roles could we play? Do we need to re-establish a permanent military presence in Europe, as we had during the Cold War? To what degree should it be geared to the support of an emerging European defence capacity, as opposed to simply being committed to NATO – particularly if America's commitment to NATO wanes? If a major security incident were to break out somewhere in Asia or the Middle East that was vital to our interests and those of other allies, but the US declined to respond, with whom would we work and how? If a humanitarian crisis broke out in Africa that demanded an international response, but the US refused to participate, with whom could we work and how? All of these contingencies require us to think hard about what equipment we must buy, who we will have to train to operate with and how we would get sizable and appropriate Canadian military forces into these regions and sustain them there without necessarily being able to rely on the US. It is an enormous set of challenges. If we do end up spending 5% of GDP on defence and defence-related costs, we will have some \$150 billion annually to meet it, but hard choices will need to be made regardless. We have to start thinking about them.

Third, Canadians are going to need to be willing to get over some old shibboleths which have taken hold over their thinking on defence matters. This will require considerable political

leadership over a sustained period of time. We need to accept that one of the primary purposes of the Canadian Armed Forces is to be able to project sizable amounts of lethal force when required. I am constantly amazed, when I talk to people about the submarine purchase, for example, and mention that the Statement of Requirements for the bidders on that contract specified that these vessels be capable of firing long-range, land-attack, precision-guided missiles. The idea that Canada would acquire a vessel which can stealthily approach the coast of a possible enemy and fire missiles at targets thousands of kilometres inland strikes many Canadians as somehow criminal. I am often asked, “Why would we do that?” Because we might need to one day, particularly if we face an enemy that is threatening us, or our allies, *and the United States is no longer prepared to do it for us*. Similarly, attitudes to missile defence and nuclear weapons which are based on conceptions of strategic stability that have not existed since the 1980s need to be re-thought. While the fantasy elements of Trump’s Golden Dome remain ridiculous, not all missile defence is necessarily bad. And while Canada may not need to develop its own nuclear weapons, participation in new arrangements that will be necessary to replace America’s nuclear umbrella (if it really is folded up one day) need to be considered on their merits and not solely on the basis of high-minded ideals – particularly since we were happy enough to shelter under the American nuclear umbrella for decades even as we disparaged it. If that umbrella goes away, Canada may need to participate in developing another.

This leads to the fourth point argued in these papers; Canadians are going to need to face the difficult fact that the international order they have long known is now fundamentally different. This will require that a level of hard-nosed understanding of our interests is going to have to be developed in Canada. Once again, political leadership will be required. We have had the luxury of devoting ourselves to deeply satisfying causes because we could. This is not a call to abandon our values, but it is a call to accept that, as Prime Minister Carney puts it, we must learn that we sometimes simply have to accept the world as we find it. Today, part of this acceptance is being able to defend ourselves and contribute to the defence of our allies in hard power terms, even as we work towards a world where such power will no longer be as necessary.

At the end of this Report, a fifth paper is appended as an Epilogue. It is somewhat different to the others in that it is a more speculative paper, which looks at what might happen if the United States were ever to militarily attack Canada. I do not believe that this is likely. But,

in the face of Trump's statements over Greenland, and his taunts over Canada as the 51st state, the effort to logically think through what an attack could look like and what would happen if such an attack did take place was an interesting thought exercise. At the least, it forces one to question assumptions and consider alternatives which are wildly different from what most people regard as likely. One thing which does arise from this, and which ties in with ideas developed in the other papers, is a recognition that the Canadian public is going to have to develop a much greater sense of resilience in the face of bullying and threats.

Versions of the papers contained in this Policy Report were published by *The Walrus* magazine between September 2025 and March 2026. The original papers submitted to *The Walrus* were edited by that magazine to fit their editorial standards, as might be expected. In this process, the rather academic style of writing evolved, and the footnotes were removed. As they appear here, the papers revert to their original form and are thus intended for a more policy/academic audience. I am very grateful to the editor of *The Walrus*, Carmine Starnino, for his enthusiasm for this project, and support for the development of these articles. They were not originally conceived as a series, but with his support became such. I am also grateful to him for his willingness to see different versions of the papers published here. I would also like to thank Professor Alexandra Gheciu and Renée Shroyer of the Centre for International Policy Studies (CIPS) at the University of Ottawa for their support in publishing the papers here.

It is my hope that, taken together, these papers will contribute to discussions which are necessary today.

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The F35 and Canada’s “Worldview”¹

For eighty years, Canada’s Armed Forces have understood themselves in a particular way. On the surface, they talk about weapons and capabilities. But underneath that technical discussion lies a guiding doctrine: that Canada’s Armed Forces belong as close to the side of the United States military as possible.²

The Armed Forces even have a word for it: “interoperability.” In practice, for Canada’s military, interoperability means building a military designed to work in lockstep with its US counterpart at the highest levels of combat.³ This is a level of integration far beyond what most North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) allies seek through such things as standardised stocks of ammunition. The Royal Canadian Navy is one of a very few that can seamlessly embed a ship into a US carrier battle group, and regularly does. Our Army commanders are trained to operate jointly with US counterparts and even assume senior command positions of major US Army formations on an exchange basis. And the Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF) functions as part of the broader binational framework of air defence, which is led by the US: NORAD (North American Aerospace Defense Command).

Interoperability with America’s warfighting ranks is the cornerstone of the Canadian military’s worldview. This worldview arose during the Cold War, when the idea that Canada would ever act militarily apart from the US, especially abroad, was inconceivable. If Canada’s military ever went overseas to fight, it would do so as part of a coalition, with the US at the head of that group. Being totally interoperable with the US military, or as close to it as possible, guaranteed that we would be able to fit into any conceivable international coalition that might be formed. But is this still the case? As Donald Trump casts doubt on America’s commitment to NATO and its core principle – Article 5, the pledge that an attack on one is an attack on all – should Canada assume it will always fight alongside the US?⁴

¹ An earlier version of this paper first appeared in *The Walrus* online on September 17, 2025. It is reprinted here by permission of *The Walrus*. Portions of this paper also appeared in another paper published by *The Walrus* on 8 December, 2025 and are reprinted by permission.

² Government of Canada, “The Canada-US Defence Relationship,” at: <https://www.canada.ca/en/news/archive/2014/04/canada-defence-relationship.html>

³ For historical context see: Middlemiss, DW and D. Stairs, “The Canadian Forces and the Doctrine of Interoperability,” Institute for Research on Public Policy, 11 June, 2002, at: <https://irpp.org/research-studies/policy-matters-vol3-no7/>

⁴ Shear, M.D., “Trump’s Brusque Threat to Europe: Go It Alone,” *New York Times*, 1 April, 2026, at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2026/04/01/world/middleeast/trump-europe-nato-iran.html>

That question is at the heart of Canadian defence planning today. Do we assume that Trump is a harbinger of things to come, even after he leaves office, and that we must develop capacities that reduce reliance on the US by acquiring the ability to both work with others and be more self-reliant? Or do we bet on Trump as a temporary blip; trusting that sanity will be restored and thus resist throwing away the benefits of decades of close interoperability?

The fight over the F35 is where this debate cuts most immediately right now. If we stick with the decision to purchase the F35, and no other type of fighter, we will be making a critical aspect of our defence utterly dependent on continued intense cooperation with the US. For reasons explained below, Canada's F35s will be completely reliant on the US to function, much more than any previous jet we have purchased has been, even previous ones made in the US. But we will also be making a much bigger statement about our future.

From the RCAF's perspective, the contest is portrayed as being between the F35's technical strengths and those of its rivals. But at stake is more than a matchup of different fighters. RCAF generals, retired and serving, put the matter in a framework of saying that not buying the F35 is tantamount to accepting that Canada will no longer field a front-line Air Force. This is, of course, absurd. Many countries don't have F35s and have perfectly good (and quite lethal) Air Forces. Some countries, such as Spain, the United Arab Emirates, Switzerland and India, have even turned their backs on the F35 in favour of other aircraft.

What they are saying, however, is that, if Canada turns away from the F35, we won't have an RCAF as *they* understand and have trained their whole lives for; one which is seamlessly interoperable with the US Air Force. These are thoroughly good and decent men, but they simply cannot comprehend an RCAF that does not fit their worldview. The real question is whether this approach still makes sense given the path the US is on. It's no longer enough to accept interoperability as dogma. We have to ask something harder. What is it actually for? Why do we insist on it? And, ultimately, does it make Canada safer?

The F35

The F35 is a technical wonder. It can acquire, process and fuse together an astonishing volume and array of different types of information to create an unparalleled picture of the

battlefield. It can securely link itself to other F35s spread over vast distances, and also to forces at sea, on the ground and in space to create and prosecute a unique, multi-dimensional, real-time understanding of an unfolding battle. On top of that, it is stealthy; the enemy cannot see it coming. For these reasons, the RCAF consistently selected the F35 in competitions and pushed different Canadian Governments to buy it, though questions have arisen as to how fair those competitions were and whether the RCAF tailored the requirements to favour the F35 over all others.⁵

This combination of stealth and unparalleled sensor and computing capability makes the F35 a so-called 5th generation fighter – as opposed to our venerable CF18s, which are 4th generation.⁶ Actually, some 4th generation aircraft are now called 4.5 generation because they have acquired more advanced capabilities than their predecessors, though they do not have stealth or approach the F35 in sensor and computing capabilities. Canada’s remaining CF18s achieved 4.5 status in the last set of upgrades, but they are rapidly nearing the end of their lives. To use an analogy, they are very tired old cars, tricked out with new features perhaps, but are still very tired old cars.

The F35’s performance hinges on frequent updates to its operating system. All of this comes from the Joint Program Office, or JPO.⁷ The JPO is the Pentagon’s nerve center for the F35, steering the aircraft’s design, costs, and upkeep. Critically, the JPO controls the “source codes” of the F35; the basic software which allows the jet to receive the latest improvements to keep going and evolve. These source codes are *not* shared with the purchaser of the aircraft (though Israel can make changes other F35 partners cannot).⁸

This situation obviously creates a critical dependency. Though there has been talk of a mythical “kill switch” which would allow the US to disable F35s belonging to allies (the US denies there is one), it is really not necessary. If the upgrades are cut off, the F35 soon becomes less capable and even unusable.⁹ And without having access to the source codes, the operator of the aircraft cannot make upgrades themselves.

⁵ Jones, P., “The Leaked Report Pushing Mark Carney Towards the F35 Fighter Jet,” *The Walrus*, 8 December 2025 at: <https://thewalrus.ca/the-leaked-report-pushing-mark-carney-toward-the-f-35-fighter-jet/>

⁶ Australian Military Aviation, “Five Generations of Jets,” at, <https://fighterworld.com.au/a-z-fighter-aircraft/five-generations-of-jets/>

⁷ <https://www.navair.navy.mil/organization/F-35-Lightning-II-Joint-Program-Office>

⁸ <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/reboot/only-israel-can-modify-its-f-35-stealth-fighters-heres-why-165724>

⁹ <https://www.twz.com/air/you-dont-need-a-kill-switch-to-hobble-exported-f-35s>

This is new. Previously, one bought a fighter and acquired the ability to more-or-less independently operate and maintain it. This is what Canada has done in periodically upgrading its CF18s. Of course, remaining on good terms with the vendor and other users makes a lot of sense to be able to share the load of maintaining and upgrading the aircraft. But, in the final analysis, the vendor could not simply shut down the plane. Iran, for example, bought US fighters under the Shah. After the Revolution the US cut off support, but the Iranians kept them going; not at the peak of capability they would have enjoyed if they still had relations with the US, but the airplanes were operable for many years.

This is not possible with the F35. Fall out of favour with the JPO (or the US government) and your jets could soon be less capable or even inoperable. When the F35 was first devised and developed, we lived in a world where the RCAF's worldview held firm; it was unthinkable that the US would cut off an ally. It is still unlikely that they would – but is it *unthinkable*? Until a few months ago, it was unthinkable a US President would threaten the independence or territorial integrity of an ally, even rhetorically.

Moreover, not all F35s bought by international partners will be equal. Trump, never one to miss an opportunity to gloat, has publicly mused that fighters sold to allies could be less capable than the version retained by the US – because they might not be allies one day.¹⁰ Although he was making these remarks in the context of another aircraft type, the basic principle, in other words, is that one will never know if one's F35 is a top-of-the-line model or one that is dumbed down. Without access to the source codes, you simply have to trust that the upgrades from the JPO will keep your version of the F35 at the head of the pack.

When pressed, senior RCAF officers admit that the JPO will rank partners, but insist Canada's F35s will be near the top. We are part of the 5 eyes intelligence arrangement. Some of our F35s will be dedicated to the defence of North America, which means that the Americans will have an interest in our jets being as capable as possible. Beyond that, it is just the RCAF's worldview that our special relationship with the US Air Force will carry the day no matter what; we are “inside the tent” in a way almost no one else is.

¹⁰ Allison, G., “US to reduce capabilities of new jet purchased by allies,” *UK Defence Journal*, 23 March, 2025, at: <https://ukdefencejournal.org.uk/u-s-to-reduce-capabilities-of-new-jet-purchased-by-allies/>

But we were once, supposedly, inside a very special tent in terms of trade with the US under the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and then the Canada-United States-Mexico Agreement (CUSMA). How is that going these days? If, as Prime Minister Carney says, the era of an ever-deepening relationship with the US is “over,” how do we know that our F35s will not slip into second-class status? And if we decide one day to join a coalition of nations taking action on a matter that the US opposes, how do we know that the JPO won’t cut off our F35s?

This is not a theoretical issue. Imagine, for example, that Putin breaks a peace he may one day sign with Ukraine (not a big leap of imagination). Donald Trump, or his successor, President JD Vance, decides not to come to Ukraine’s aid because they value relations with Russia more. Kyiv is determined to fight, and a consortium of nations decides to help. Canada dispatches F35s to join the effort. The American President rejects this, fearing that F35s (even non-American F35s) fighting Russian troops undercuts his broader objectives for the US-Russia relationship. Will the JPO be ordered to cut off, or dumb down, our fighters?

The Gripen Alternative?

All of this assumes the F35 will always reliably work as advertised; a claim undermined by the persistent glitches that befall the jet. It still does not perform as advertised and the US Government Accountability Office (GAO) has found that promised software upgrades which will allow it to fulfil promises made when it was purchased are at least 5 years behind schedule and \$6 billion (US) over budget.¹¹ There are also fears as to whether the aircraft’s prized tech will hold up over its lifespan. The F35 is supposed to be a front-line fighter for 30 or more years. What if the secrets of its stealth are unravelled by an adversary in that time? Will the F35 still be so lethal if the enemy can see it coming? Throughout history, military advantages have come and gone, from the crossbow to the Dreadnought battleship to MIRVed missiles (Multiple Independently Targetable Re-entry Vehicle). Supposedly game-changing weapons have eventually been cracked, copied, or countered by adversaries.

¹¹ Government Accountability Office, Report to Congressional Committees, *F-35 Joint Strike Fighter: Actions Needed to Address Late Deliveries and Improve Future Development*, September 2025, at: <https://www.gao.gov/assets/gao-25-107632.pdf>

The alternative is to buy a new 4.5 generation fighter, such as the Swedish Gripen. It would not be as capable as the F35 across the same range of missions. It might not be as interoperable with the US Air Force for the NORAD mission, though ways could be found around that through tailored solutions, particularly if we controlled the source codes as Saab (the manufacturer of the Gripen) has offered, and could tailor them to NORAD's unique requirements. And it might mean cutting ourselves off from the evolving networked warfighting framework the US is developing. It would be a significant break from the RCAF's worldview.

Against that, the Gripen is significantly cheaper to operate, and achieves a much greater mission availability than the extremely complex and maintenance-intensive F35. According to a June 2025 study by the US Congressional Budget Office, the F35 achieves "mission capable" status between 50 percent and 60 percent of the time,¹² well short of the Gripen's availability rate of 80 percent to 90 percent (according to figures by Saab, as validated by various air forces who have tested the plane, such as Switzerland and Brazil). Though not directly related to mission availability, the cost per flight hour is also an important point of comparison as to how much an air force can be expected to actually fly an aircraft. The more it costs per hour of flight, the less flying you are likely to do. Here, according to sources such as the GAO and the RAND Corp., the F35 has a cost per flight hour of between \$33,000 and \$50,000 (US) (depending on the variant), while the Gripen has a cost per flight hour of \$8,000–\$12,000 (US).¹³

Moreover, if we selected the Gripen, we would control our Air Force. If we accepted Saab's offer to build in Canada under license, we would understand the aircraft in a way we will never understand the F35. We will have the ability to negotiate access to the source codes (as Brazil did when it bought the Gripen¹⁴), and to develop the capacity to perform the software programming. And there are ways that we could make up for the deficiencies of not having

¹² Congressional Budget Office, "Availability, Use, and Operating and Support Costs of F-35 Fighter Aircraft," June 2025, at:

<https://www.cbo.gov/publication/61482#:~:text=Since%202022%2C%20fleetwide%20availability%20of%20F%2D35s%20has,like%20to%20achieve%20higher%20rates%20of%20availability>

¹³ See the table embedded in Di Trapani, A., "Why the F35 Program is Under Fire Again," *Simple Flying*, 22 Nov., 2025, at: <https://simpleflying.com/why-f-35-program-under-fire/>

¹⁴ <https://www.saab.com/markets/brazil/brazilian-gripen-programme/transfer-of-technology>. See also *CBC News*, "Saab dangles sovereign data centre in Montreal to undercut F35 fighter contract," 10 April, 2026, at: <https://ca.news.yahoo.com/saab-dangles-sovereign-data-centre-080000255.html?shem=dsdf.sharefoc.agadiscover.srdl.sh/x/discover/m1/4>

F35s. For example, if we also invested in a fleet of highly capable airborne warning systems, such as the Saab “GlobalEye” aircraft (based on a Bombardier business jet), they could do some of the work in terms of sensing and fusing data, which they would then transmit to our 4.5 generation fighters. Requiring more communications links, it would be a more cumbersome approach, and maybe not as capable, but one that we would control.

Would such an Air Force be as capable as one equipped with F35s? Perhaps not in a battle against what the military calls a “peer adversary”¹⁵ – a nation equipped to the same standard as the US Air Force (USAF). But how many of these are there? Perhaps, if there is a future conflict with a one day thoroughly modernised Chinese Air Force over Taiwan our air contribution could be limited. But, if one looks at what Canada’s Air Force has actually done in past decades, from air campaigns in the Persian Gulf, to Yugoslavia/Kosovo, to Libya, they did not involve peer-to-peer combat.

Conclusion: A Mixed-fleet Future

But, of course, the key fact today is that it is no longer a question of *either/or* in terms of the F35. We are contractually committed to 16 of them, and advance payments have been made on the construction of 14 more. So, we are going to have at least some F35s no matter what. The question really is whether we will have a fleet made up entirely of F35s as the RCAF wants. If we cap our purchase at 16, 30, or some other number, we would then be into the realm of a mixed fleet of F35s and the Gripen as a new 4.5 generation fighter.

To the RCAF, this is a potential nightmare. It requires separate logistics and training structures to maintain each aircraft. We ran mixed fleets during the Cold War, but our Air Force was a lot bigger, and we spent a lot more (as a percentage of GDP) on it. As spending ramped up for the Korean War, defence spending briefly rose above 7%, and was routinely above 6% in the 1950s, before settling into a range of 4-6% until the mid-1960s, dropping to 2-3.5% until the early 1970s, when it dropped below 2% and declined precipitously after that.¹⁶ While there may be a social consensus on more defence spending today, will it last?

¹⁵ <https://www.mca-marines.org/wp-content/uploads/Fighting-a-Peer-Adversary.pdf>, https://www.airuniversity.af.edu/Wild-Blue-Yonder/Articles/Article-Display/Article/3913449/mission-command-doctrinal-improvements-for-peer-conflict/#_ednref16

¹⁶ See Appendix G of, House of Commons Canada, Report of the Standing Committee on National Defence, *Canada and NATO: An Alliance Forged in Strength and Reliability*, June, 2018, at: <https://www.ourcommons.ca/DocumentViewer/en/42-1/NDDN/report-10/page-144>

Canadians are notorious for being willing to spend on defence when we have to, but then quietly letting it drop when we think we can get away with it.¹⁷ The RCAF is not wrong to worry that a mixed fleet means they will eventually end up holding the bag of two different fighters with not enough money to operate or upgrade either of them properly.

But a mixed fleet, properly funded, would mean that we will always fully control at least part of our Air Force. It would enable us to develop really close defence relations with countries beyond the US as a hedge against a day when we will no longer be able to depend on the JPO. And we would know that, if we ever really wanted to do something that the US disagreed with, we could at least make a contribution. It is interesting to note that many other countries which have bought the F35, including such close friends as the United Kingdom (UK), Australia, Japan, Germany and others, are maintaining mixed fleets.

That brings us back to the real question: What is Canada's worldview? Not the Canadian Armed Force's or even the RCAF's—but *Canada's*? That should be the foundation of this decision. The RCAF sees itself as a junior partner to the US Air Force, and sees the F35 as the sole fighter aircraft to meet what it believes is Canada's enduring interoperability imperative. This position is the logical extension of many decades of experience. The Carney government, however, must decide whether staking the country's future on a single jet matches our national vision. Is total interoperability with the US still to be at the core of our national defence posture, or do we envisage the emergence of a world in which interoperability, in itself, is no longer enough to secure Canada's place?

There will be consequences if we opt for a mixed fleet. That means facing the fallout for Canada-US relations if we walk away from sole reliance on the F35. Washington will protest, but, given that even its own Generals admit they can't defend North America without us,¹⁸ they will ultimately find a way to adapt to a mixed fleet. And, much as the US Ambassador to Canada threatens that not going through with the full F35 purchase will call the very future of NORAD into question,¹⁹ NORAD's own commander, a US Air Force General, has recently admitted that the defence of North America can be accomplished

¹⁷ Dawson, T., "The long history of Canada failing to hit its military spending targets," *National Post*, 9 June, 2025 at: <https://nationalpost.com/news/canada/history-canada-nato-military-spending-targets>

¹⁸ This is particularly true with respect to the rapidly evolving threat of cruise missiles. See the comments of Gen Gregory Guillot, Commander of NORAD at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9dNI6H1SExs>

¹⁹ Common, D., "NORAD pact would change if Canada pulls back from F35 order: US Ambassador," *CBC News*, 26 January, 2026, at: <https://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/norad-canada-us-f35-9.7059800>

perfectly well by a capable, modern 4.5 generation fighter.²⁰ If our part of the defence of North America could arguably be handled by a 4.5 generation fighter in sufficient numbers, linked to an airborne warning capability, we would still be “in the room” when decisions are made regarding the aerospace defence of our North.

In the end, this decision isn’t just about military hardware. It’s about core beliefs of who we are and where we see ourselves in a rapidly changing world. If the Canadian Government goes forward with a mixed fleet, including our first fighter jet not designed or made in the US since the 1950s, it will be signalling that a future which is not entirely in lock-step with the US, is where Canada sees its military going in the world.

²⁰ Pugliese, D., “NORAD Commander says F35-type aircraft not needed to defend North America,” *Ottawa Citizen*, 30 March, 2026, at: <https://ottawacitizen.com/public-service/defence-watch/norad-f-35-fighter-jet-north-america>

Canada's Very "UnCanadian" Submarines²¹

*"In this dangerous and difficult world, we need to think differently in Canada... (Submarines bring) a very unCanadian capability and that's the ability to stealthily approach another coast and hold **them** at risk. Because in this world, it's not enough to sit back and wait for someone to attack us and hope that we can defeat that attack. We need to be capable of deterring that attack and potentially retaliating against that attack to make sure that we can protect ourselves and hold them at risk, just as they hold us at risk. It's a different world. It's a different way of thinking for us in Canada."*

Vice Admiral Angus Topshee, Commander of the Royal Canadian Navy,
Ottawa, March 6, 2025.²²

The enhancements to Canada's military capability that will come with dramatically increased defence spending will require an enormous change in the way we think about our place in the world. Perhaps no other single weapon system under consideration encapsulates that fact so significantly as the decision to purchase up to 12 submarines for the Royal Canadian Navy (RCN). The ultimate combination of stealth and lethality, a modern submarine brings an unparalleled ability to clandestinely watch and to threaten a potential adversary; to quietly sit off their coast and hold them at risk at a time and place of our choosing. Simply knowing that Canada has such submarines would force an adversary nation to assume that they *could* be present anytime, anywhere.

During the Cold War and up to today, Canada has operated a small submarine force. Officially, it has been dedicated to providing training for our surface fleet – our submarines have provided targets for our destroyers and frigates to practice against.²³ But that is not all Canada's submarines have done. Quietly, and without much public discussion, they were upgraded during the Cold War to provide an ability to serve as offensive weapons.²⁴ Thus,

²¹ An earlier version of this paper first appeared in *The Walrus* online on November 10, 2025. It is reprinted here by permission of *The Walrus*.

²² Quote from Vice Admiral Topshee remarks to the CDA conference in Ottawa, available at: <https://www.cpac.ca/public-record/episode/ottawa-conference-on-security-and-defence--day-2?id=ef8e9c82-dc7c-4ee3-a272-e3bece613a43> (discussion of submarines between 36 minutes and 38 minutes, 20 seconds)

²³ See comments of Vice Admiral Topshee on this, beginning at 36 minutes 35 seconds: "Our submarines had never been acquired for offensive roles or for even defensive roles. Our submarines have historically been acquired in Canada to train our surface fleet in how to defeat submarines."

²⁴ Gimblett, Richard H., ed. 2009. *The Naval Service of Canada 1910–2010: The Centennial Story*. Toronto: Dundurn Press, p. 179; and Milner, M. 2012. *Canada's Navy: The First Century*, University of Toronto Press, p. 273.

Admiral Topshee's words are not, strictly speaking, true in terms of Canada acquiring a new capability. They are undoubtedly true, however, in terms of the *scale* of that capability, which will be available to Canada if we go ahead with this purchase, but that scale will change everything. And, if we equip these vessels with the ability to launch long-range precision attacks against targets inland, that will be an entirely new capability for Canada's submarine force.²⁵

Canada's Cold War submarine capability consisted of 3 British built submarines of what was known as the "O" class – each of them had names beginning with the letter O, beginning with the first, the British *Oberon*. There were 27 O class submarines built and they were operated by the UK, Australia, Brazil and Chile, as well as Canada. Our subs were named after indigenous tribes of Canada: *Ojibwa*, *Onondaga* and *Okanagan*. Importantly, the fact that there was a large fleet of these submarines in operation with close allies meant that engineering and maintenance work could be spread over many hulls. Even though we only operated a handful of these boats, economies of scale were thus possible as knowledge was passed between countries which operated the subs (and especially between Canada, the UK and Australia). Crews could be trained, and personnel gaps filled, in a more cost-effective way through exchanges, which was, again, especially true for the Commonwealth O-boat operators who regularly cross-posted crew for training and experience. More than these things, a deep reservoir of intense operational experience in how to use these boats to best effect was developed and shared over many decades.

After a lengthy and tortuous acquisition process, which saw them ordered, cancelled and re-ordered as Liberal and Conservative governments turned over (some things never change), the O boats began entering RCN service in 1965. The last one was decommissioned in 2000, well past what should have been the end of its life. Over the course of their service, they went from relatively simple practice targets for Canada's surface fleet, to vessels able to

²⁵ The initial request for information from the Canadian Government to potential submarine providers included a specification that the vessels proposed should be "capable of conducting 'precision attacks' and would (be) equipped with heavyweight torpedoes, anti-ship missiles and long-range precision land attack missiles..." Pugliese, D., "Canada kicks off submarine tender after survey of global vendors," *Defense News*, Sept 14, 2024, at: <https://www.defensenews.com/global/the-americas/2024/09/19/canada-kicks-off-submarine-tender-after-survey-of-global-vendors/>

engage in stealthy intelligence collection and deterrence operations in their own right; they were made able, through upgrades, to deploy into the North Atlantic as a capable, if small, part of the larger NATO submarine force which monitored, gathered intelligence on and stood ready to attack Soviet submarines and other warships in the event of a conflict. Few Canadians know it, as the changes in our O class submarines were not widely publicized at the time, but our Cold War submariners were on the front lines in a very real and dangerous way.²⁶ The transition from training vessels to attack submarines was a classic case of what the military calls “mission creep.”

As the Cold War ended the RCN (then called “Maritime Command,” thanks to Paul Hellyer) was deeply concerned that the O class boats would not be replaced. The draw-down of defence spending at the end of the Cold War, and periods of austerity in government spending generally during these years, made the acquisition of a new submarine force highly problematic. This was a serious problem for the Navy in that the skills required to operate and maintain submarines are what the service calls “perishable.” If they are not used continuously, they quickly atrophy and die; maintenance facilities fall into disuse, and, more importantly, highly skilled people go off to do other things and their experience is lost as there is no pipeline of people being trained to replace them. The Navy knew that re-starting a submarine capability from scratch down the line would be horrendously expensive and time consuming if that capability was allowed to die with the decommissioning of the O boats. Naval leaders were desperate to find a way to keep a submarine force in being.

There was another reason why Canada’s Naval leaders wanted to maintain a submarine force. Given their inherent stealthiness, submarine operations require that friendly nations undertake a process designed to prevent collisions and what the military calls “blue-on-blue” engagements; accidental instances whereby friendly forces engage each other because they mistake an allied vessel for a potential enemy. Thus, the concepts of “Waterspace Management” and “Prevention of Mutual Interference” are important for submarine operations.²⁷ What they essentially amount to is that allied nations inform each other of

²⁶ Michael Whitby, “[Boomers, Dragers, and Black Boxes: The Operational Legacy of Canada’s Oberon Class Submarines, 1983-1998](#),” in *The Northern Mariner / Le marin du nord* XVIII: 3 & 4 (July & October 2013).

²⁷ Dobbs, M. and R. Wong, “Preventing Undersea Mishaps,” *Proceedings of the USNI*, 136(6), June 2010, at: <https://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/2010/june/preventing-undersea-mishaps> The US Department of

where their submarines are operating when there is a chance they may come into contact, so as to de-conflict any potential for mistaken engagements between them. NATO goes so far as to establish individual patrol areas to ensure that only one allied submarine is in a given space. This means that a NATO submarine will know that any other sub it encounters in its patrol area must be an adversary. Having Canadian submarines operating off our coasts requires our allies to tell us if they have submarines in or near our waters if such mistakes are to be avoided. In the late 1990s, when the need to replace the O class became critical, Waterspace Management did not apply for Canada in the high Arctic as our submarines could not operate there. But it did mean that we would at least know what allies (including the Americans) were doing off our other coasts – provided we retained submarines.

With few other choices available the Navy recommended the acquisition of 4 used British submarines known as the *Upholder* class, which were built in the 1980s. The *Upholders* (which were re-named the *Victoria* class upon entering Canadian service) were a dicey proposition. They were the last conventionally powered submarines Britain built before going to an all-nuclear powered fleet. They had been decommissioned almost as soon as they were built and had sat at dock for years before Canada finally bought them in 1998.²⁸ This history had a serious impact on their seaworthiness. More importantly, they were effectively orphans – unlike the O class boats, there was no wider group of countries operating many of them. Only 4 were ever built and Canada took them all. Canada, which had never built a submarine, had to take over the full maintenance of these already tired boats on its own and all aspects of training their crews.

The result was predictable. Poor operational availability and serious cost overruns have plagued the programme. Our submarine fleet has spent most of its time tied up at dockside, though some of them have been able to undertake more lengthy and complex missions in recent years.²⁹ The Navy knew this was likely to happen. An internal Department of

Defense defines Waterspace Management as: “The allocation of waterspace in terms of antisubmarine warfare attack procedures to permit the rapid and effective engagement of hostile submarines while preventing inadvertent attacks on friendly submarines.” *Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms*, US DOD, 2005.

²⁸ A general history of the *Upholders* may be found at:

<https://www.seaforces.org/marint/Royal-Navy/Submarine/Upholder-class.htm> For more on the Canadian acquisition see, Gimblett, R., and K. Gagnon, “Victoria Class Submarines,” in *Guardians of the North; Canadian Warships and Maritime Aircraft, 1910-2025*, Dundurn Press, 2025, pp. 231-236. See also the entry on the *Victoria* class in the *Canadian Encyclopedia* for March 9, 2023 at:

<https://thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/victoria-class-submarines>

²⁹ Common, D., “Canadian sub on mission to bolster North Korea surveillance,” CBC News, 6 February, 2018, at: <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/hmcs-chicoutimi-submarine-canada-pacific-north-korea-1.4511238>

National Defence (DND) study in 2003 (while the acquisition was still in progress) found the costs and difficulties of bringing these boats into Canadian service had been significantly underestimated by the Navy in its public statements.³⁰ Whether it fessed up to the Government of the day when the *Victorias* were bought is debatable. Moreover, at the time of purchase, the cost-effectiveness of buying “off-the-shelf” was highlighted publicly and a public impression was created that at least some of the costs would be offset by “bartering” with the UK for access to military training sites in Canada. Neither of these things turned out to be true. The Navy was criticised for saying both of these things in an April 2005 Report of the Standing Committee on National Defence and Veterans Affairs.³¹

For Canada’s Navy, however, the issue was at all costs to keep at least some submarines in active service, lest the capability to operate any submarines at all was lost. Thus, the *Victorias* were always going to be a bridge to a future submarine, perhaps from a larger class of boats where various costs and opportunities might be shared across several nations. Naval officers believed that Canada would eventually come to its senses and realise that it needed a larger fleet of submarines able to patrol all three of its coasts, as well as contribute to international operations. Although the option of nuclear-powered submarines with their inherent ability to operate throughout the Arctic had been scrapped with the death of the 1987-89 plan to buy them,³² Naval leaders foresaw that technology advances would likely ensure that the next class of conventionally powered submarines would be more capable of Arctic operations.

Fast forward to today. Advances in technology mean that non-nuclear powered submarines can operate usefully in the Arctic. The key is something called “Air Independent Propulsion,” which allows conventionally powered submarines to remain submerged for lengthy periods.³³ Climate change means that the conditions there are not so daunting for

³⁰ See National Defence – Chief of Review Services, “Review of the Submarine Acquisition/Capability Life Extension Program,” May 2003, at: https://publications.gc.ca/collections/collection_2016/mdn-dnd/D58-109-2003-eng.pdf (Released publicly, with redactions, in 2016 in response to an Access to Information request).

³¹ “Canada’s Procurement of Victoria Class Submarines,” available at: <https://www.ourcommons.ca/Content/Committee/381/NDDN/Reports/RP1773092/nddnrp01/nddnrp01-e.pdf>

³² *New York Times*, “Canada Cancelling Plan to Buy Atom Submarines,” April 28, 1989.

³³ See Ibrahim, A., “Air-Independent Propulsion (AIP) Submarines (SSP): Bridging the Gap between Conventional (SSK) and Nuclear Powered Attack Submarines (SSN),” *Global Defense Insight*, 26 December,

conventional subs as they once were; there is not so much ice about and it is not so thick. And, of course, the strategic and economic importance of the Arctic is growing as the climate changes. Canadians are much more generally aware of the threat to their north and prepared to do something about it. There is now a more widely accepted sense in the public that Canada needs submarines, and in much greater numbers than we have had them heretofore.³⁴ Having Canadian submarines routinely operating in or near the Arctic will finally mean that Allies will (in theory, at least) have to tell us if they are there, if the requirements of Waterspace Management are to be adhered to.

For those Canadian Naval Officers who fought a difficult bureaucratic and budgetary battle over many decades to keep a Canadian submarine capability alive, the moment of payoff for their efforts has arrived. What has also arrived, as Admiral Topshee's comments quoted at the beginning of this article say, is a willingness on the part of Canada's Naval leadership to admit from the outset that these submarines are meant to be employed as lethal weapons. Also of note is his admission that we will not simply be using them to defend Canadian waters. Though that is their primary purpose, we intend them to be used to reach out and threaten others who we believe are threatening us. While this is something we have always done quietly and at a small scale with our O class and *Victoria* class submarines, though they were never equipped with a land-attack missile capability, we are now going to make no bones about it. And we will have the means to do it on a significant scale. If we do end up buying 12 of these submarines, it will make us a serious player in the submarine world. For example, the German-Norwegian consortium, one of the leading contenders to provide these submarines, along with South Korea, is aiming for a fleet of 9 German boats and between 4 and 6 Norwegian. Whether we select the German/Norwegian submarine or the South Korean, our submarines will no longer be orphans; they will be part of a larger fleet which can be maintained and upgraded more cost-efficiently.

2024, at:

<https://defensetalks.com/air-independent-propulsion-air-submarines-ssp-bridging-the-gap-between-conventional-ssk-and-nuclear-powered-attack-submarines-ssn/>

³⁴ Griffiths, A., "Support for Submarine Replacement," *Canadian Naval Review*, 16 October, 2024, at: <https://www.navalreview.ca/2024/10/support-for-submarine-replacement/#:~:text=According%20to%20the%20survey%2C%2044%25%20said%20they,not%20on%20the%20coasts%2C%20but%20in%20Ontario>. See also, Buckley, C., "3 in 4 Canadians show support for defence spending on new submarines, Nanos survey shows," CTV News, 14 October, 2024, at:

<https://www.ctvnews.ca/politics/article/3-in-4-canadians-show-support-for-defence-spending-on-new-submarine-s-nanos-survey-shows/>

In normal peacetime operations a fleet of 12 will give Canada the ability to always have at least one submarine off each of its 3 coasts, with some available to perform other international tasks at all times. In an international crisis or conflict, we will be able to “surge” several of them into a conflict zone for a period of time if we choose to do so. These are not small numbers, and could make Canada one of the leading contributors in a future coalition, particularly if we field extremely capable and advanced submarines with land attack capability. If we have a surface fleet of commensurate size and capability, which defence planners also anticipate as budgets go up, Canadians are going to have to get used to the fact that we are going to have a Navy capable of playing a leading role in the fighting that may be done by future coalitions. This will also be true of the Air Force and the Army as our total defence-related spending moves towards the newly agreed NATO goal of 5% of GDP (3.5% on direct military spending, and a further 1.5% on “defence-related” spending – facilities and infrastructure which will support defence).

And, of course, it’s not only submarines and the larger Navy. This will also be true of the Army and the Air Force. We presently have roughly 85,000 people in our military, counting both regulars and reservists; this could easily more than double. Permanent bases abroad, such as we maintained during the Cold War, are completely feasible if we wish to signal our determination to defend allies (and newly important trading partners as we try to rebalance our trade away from the US) in Europe and Asia. A fleet of advanced fighters in the hundreds is likely, rather than the few dozen old aircraft we presently have. We are about to go on a spending spree not seen since World War II.

This is what makes Admiral Topshee’s comments about how the submarine purchase is going to affect the way Canadians think about their place in the world so interesting. The submarines are the canary in the coal mine, pointing the way to a whole host of bigger issues. Canadians are not used to thinking of themselves as a serious military power and it will require some significant leadership on the part of our politicians and military leaders to take the public consciousness into this space. As part of this, Canadians are going to have to get used to the fact that we are now a nation of over 40 million with a GDP approaching \$3 trillion. Three-point five percent of that is **\$105 billion** in direct defence spending in 2024 dollars. Five percent of that represents total *annual* defence-related spending of around **\$150**

billion, in 2024 dollars. Before the Carney Government acted this year to increase defence spending to finally meet the longstanding NATO target of 2% of GDP on defence, we were spending **\$30.9 billion** a year. People are casually throwing around the figures of “3.5%” and “5%” without understanding what an exponential increase in military capability they will really mean.

Are Canadians ready for this? Do we understand that we’re on the verge of being able to respond to threats ourselves, instead of depending on the US to do it for us? Do we understand that with this capability comes an expectation from allies and adversaries alike that we will be prepared to use it? Is our political and diplomatic class ready to think of Canada as something other than a small, lightly armed junior ally—one that’s long been free to say what it wants without any real expectation of having to act?

Though we have not been leading peacekeepers for a very long time, many Canadians still consider Canada primarily in that light—when they think about defence-related matters at all. But peacekeeping no longer means, and has not meant for a long time, a few lightly armed troops sitting on an internationally agreed line between combatants who accept their presence. It means fighting your way into messy civil wars in far-away places and enforcing ceasefires and peace agreements in the face of serious opposition. We will soon have the capability to play a leading role in such missions. Will we?

Canadians are also used to their governments making significant international noise around high-profile, values-based ideas which play well with domestic constituencies on both sides.³⁵ Whether it is the “Responsibility to Protect” (Liberal), or the rejection of “coddling” dictators at places like the United Nations (UN), especially if they are perceived to be anti-Israeli (Conservative), Canadian governments have made something of a specialty of what might be called foreign policy by noisy initiative.³⁶ These episodes have played well with key domestic constituencies, but they have also been largely cost-free. It is all very well to call on the international community to intervene in countries where human rights are being abused,

³⁵ Blais, L. (Sept, 2023) “Canadian diplomacy needs to find its way back from the wilderness.” *Policy Options*. Available at: <https://policyoptions.irpp.org/2023/09/canadian-diplomacy-back-from-wilderness/>

³⁶ Schonwalder, G. “Principles and Prejudice: Foreign Policy Under the Harper Government.” Centre for International Policy Studies. Policy Brief 24, June 2014, at: <https://www.cips-cepi.ca/publications/principles-and-prejudice-foreign-policy-under-the-harper-government/> and Lemensch, M. “Canada and the Responsibility to Protect (R2P).” *Canadian Encyclopedia*. July 24, 2020, at: <https://thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/canada-and-the-responsibility-to-protect-r2p>

or to oppose authoritarians. How willing will we be to lead the charge when we will be looked at to commit serious military forces to it? In short, we are about to learn that you have to be ready to put your soldiers' lives where your mouth is.

It must also be asked whether the Canadian military is ready. It is deeply ingrained in their thinking about equipment, doctrine and operations that their proper place is as an adjunct to the US military. Can they adapt to a world in which the US is no longer the benign leader of the Western military family, but is, under Trump, going in directions we no longer wish to follow? This is not hypothetical. For many years, Canada has contributed substantially to US-led drug interdiction operations in the Caribbean. Today, with the US summarily blowing up alleged drug-running boats, possibly in contravention of international law, and intervening in places like Venezuela and possibly Cuba to change governments it does not like, questions are being asked about how much longer Canada can cooperate in such missions. Though Canadian officials argue that there is a firewall between what they are doing and the troublesome US actions, how much longer can that be maintained; how long before, say, information gathered by a Canadian surveillance aircraft is used as part of the intelligence upon which illegal targeting decisions are made by the US military?³⁷

There will always be cooperation with the US on issues such as North American aerospace defence, but other international objectives, which the US does not want to participate in or even opposes, such as major international peacemaking efforts, or missions which increasingly see it violate international or Canadian laws, may require us to think for ourselves and seek out coalitions with other like-minded nations in which we will play a much larger role. This will not come naturally or easily to Canada's military. It will take leadership and imagination to understand and embrace the requirements and opportunities for real independence that this new defence capability will give us. Thinking about how to do this must begin now, even if changes are still some years away.

³⁷ Cooke, R., "Why US Strikes on Suspected Drug Boats Have Canada 'between a rock and a hard place.'" CBC News, Oct 10, 2025,

<https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/newfoundland-labrador/us-airstrikes-caribbean-drug-smugglers-9.6932751>;

and Pugliese, D., "Canadian military will continue with U.S.-led counter-drug ops but won't support attacks on alleged smuggling boats," *Ottawa Citizen*, October 8, 2025,

<https://ottawacitizen.com/public-service/defence-watch/canadian-military-trump-drug-smuggling-boats>

More broadly, we will need to see the world much more clearly and independently. As a very small part of a larger coalition, we can presently rely on others to make the big decisions about whether to employ force abroad. That will no longer be true. If we are to make decisions about deploying significant lethal force, for example, to enforce a peace agreement when the US decides that it will not participate, we need to understand why we are doing it. A more robust Foreign Service, focused more on hard security and defence-related issues than at present, will be required to inform decision-making.

Admiral Topshee is right; the submarine purchase, and all the other capabilities that will come with 5% defence-related spending, will mean that Canadians are going to require a very different way of thinking about ourselves and the world. We will need to think through whether a foreign policy based around feel-good virtue-signaling, whether on the right or the left, is appropriate at the same time as we field one of the world's more capable militaries; if Canada starts banging the drum about some worthy idea, *and* has the military capability to actually do something about it, people are going to expect more than just words from Ottawa. And the Canadian military itself will need to think much more seriously about a wide array of questions which go along with a considerably more independent role in the world than it is used to. More broadly, we will all confront this issue, which will manifest itself in a series of difficult questions over many issues. There is, for example, the question of whether we need to create our own foreign intelligence service so that we can more fully and independently understand the world in which we are operating. Traditionally, we have eschewed this expensive and difficult task in favour of relying on our allies to provide us the information on which to make decisions. Maybe that was enough when we were only ever likely to play a small, supporting part in an allied operation. But when we are capable of sending forces abroad to be significant, even leading players in their own right, perhaps we require our own understanding of the world.

In short, if this defence increase goes ahead Canadians will, on a host of levels, need to grow up and become a lot more hard-nosed about how they approach the world and their place in it. We have Vladimir Putin, Chinese leader Xi, and, of course, Donald Trump himself to thank for that – Putin and Xi because they have forced us to wake up to the threats we face in

a dangerous world, and Trump because he has forced us to recognize that the Americans, though they will always be our neighbours, will not always necessarily be our friends.

Canada and Missile Defence: Is Life Better Under the Dome?³⁸

In July of 1979, Ronald Reagan, who was 18 months from the Presidency, visited the North American Air Defence Command (NORAD – since 1981, the North American *Aerospace* Defence Command). NORAD is carved inside Cheyenne Mountain, near Colorado Springs. He was, according to those with him, deeply impressed by the place (having been there myself some years later, it *is* impressive). During the visit, Reagan asked what the US could do to stop a nuclear missile. The answer shocked him; “Nothing.” Reagan was told that the US relied on the threat of massive retaliation to prevent an attack, but could do nothing if deterrence failed. All NORAD could do was track incoming missiles and provide information for retaliation. During the flight home, Reagan, according to an aide, “couldn't believe the United States had no defense against Soviet missiles. He slowly shook his head and said, ‘We have spent all that money and have all that equipment, and there is nothing we can do to prevent a nuclear missile from hitting us.’” Reagan reflected on the agonising decision he would face as President; his only option in the case of a nuclear attack would be to order a retaliation which would condemn millions to death. “We should have some way of defending ourselves against nuclear missiles,” Reagan concluded.³⁹ But his thinking was also conditioned by a growing sense on the part of conservative thinkers that the foundation of nuclear deterrence was immoral.

Once again, a Republican President has asked Canada to join a missile defence project. The previous times, under Reagan and George W. Bush, Canada said no – sort of – and life went on. Though there were hints of repercussions for previous failures to join, which did not materialize outside a few very specific defence channels, Trump’s assault on Canada’s economy and sovereignty make the possibility of reprisals if we reject his Golden Dome more serious.

³⁸ An earlier version of this paper first appeared in *The Walrus* online on February 23, 2026 and in the May 2026 print edition. It is reprinted here by permission of *The Walrus*.

³⁹ FitzGerald, F., *Way Out There in the Blue; Reagan, Star Wars and the End of the Cold War*, Simon and Shuster, 2001, Chapter 1; and Shultz, G.P., *Turmoil and Triumph: My Years as Secretary of State*, Scribners, 1993, 261-262.

The Golden Dome exists on two levels. On one level, it is a Research and Development (R&D) programme which will take decades and may never materialize. The other level is a fantasy of Donald Trump's, where it will cost \$175 billion, be completed by the end of his term and will be close to 100% successful, "forever ending the missile threat to the American homeland."⁴⁰ The US conservative think-tank, the American Enterprise Institute, however, estimates that the cost of Trump's system could rise to more than three **trillion** dollars and take decades, if it can ever succeed. Even building a more porous defence would cost hundreds, if not thousands of billions and take decades.⁴¹ As a long-term R&D programme, Canada can show interest, but it doesn't yet have to commit to the Golden Dome. However, in Trump's fantasy of the Golden Dome, he wants Canada to commit during his term. He has spoken of between \$US65 and \$US71 billion as the Canadian contribution – though he has generously offered it to Canada for free for the mere price of our sovereignty.⁴²

Will it even work? Beyond bold claims, details remain vague.⁴³ What has been described publicly amounts to a concept rather than a plan: a layered system combining a scaled-up version of the existing, Bush-era land-based interceptors with thousands of new sensors and weapons in space to detect launches early, track warheads, and destroy all incoming missiles and warheads before they reach US territory. There has been no released architecture of any detail and, again, scant evidence that the underlying technologies—the space-based lasers and other interceptors, especially—are close to serious testing, let alone operational readiness. Key questions about costs remain unanswered. The proposal resembles Reagan's earlier missile-defence vision: ambitious in scope, light on specifics, and dependent on breakthroughs that have eluded scientists and engineers for decades.⁴⁴

⁴⁰ Quoted in Davenport, C., Neff, W., and Steckelberg, A., "Inside Trump's Golden Dome: High-Stakes Debate Over Missile Defense Shield," *The Washington Post*, October 29, 2025, available at:

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/interactive/2025/missile-defense-star-wars-golden-dome-trump/>

⁴¹ Harrison, T., "Build Your Own Golden Dome: A Framework for Understanding Costs, Choices and Tradeoffs," American Enterprise Institute, Foreign and Defense Policy Working Paper 2025-20, September, 2025, at:

<https://www.aei.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/09/WP-Estimating-the-Cost-of-Golden-Dome.pdf?x85095>

⁴² Chaya, L., "'Canada is a Sovereign Nation:' PMO Responds to Trump's Golden Dome Offer," *CTV News*, 27 May, 2025 at: <https://www.ctvnews.ca/canada/article/golden-dome-would-cost-canada-us61-billion-trump-says/>; and Caruso-Moro, L., "Trump Raises the Price for Canada's Inclusion in the Golden Dome Defence System," *CTV News*, 17 June, 2025, at:

<https://www.ctvnews.ca/world/trumps-tariffs/article/trump-raises-the-price-for-canadas-inclusion-in-the-golden-dome-defence-system/>.

⁴³ Skibba, P., "What's the Plan for 'Golden Dome'? Even Experts Aren't Sure," *Scientific American*, 9 September, 2025, at:

<https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/u-s-golden-dome-missile-shield-is-short-on-details-but-not-on-cash/>

⁴⁴ Debusmann, B., "Can Donald Trump Build the 'Golden Dome' Over the US?" *BBC News*, 23 May, 2025, at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cyvmj6mem700>; and The Economist, "Golden Dome is One of the Most

What is Ballistic Missile Defence (BMD)?

Since the dawn of the nuclear era, many have sought defences against nuclear attack. With the advent of the Inter-Continental Ballistic Missile (ICBM) in the 1950s it was recognized that, practically, there is no way to shoot ICBMs down. But that has not stopped the US from spending \$350 to \$400 billion on Ballistic Missile Defence (BMD) from the early 1950s to the early 2020s. Of this, \$280 billion was spent on defences against ICBMs, with the remainder on defences against short-range missiles.⁴⁵ A succession of studies and prototypes have resulted: Project Defender; Nike-Zeus; Nike-X; Safeguard; Sentinel; and, my personal favourite, Project BAMBI (**B**allistic **M**issile **B**oost **I**ntercept), and its successors, Project High Frontier and the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI).⁴⁶

By the late 1960s many had come to see BMD as a chimera. Some were ready to accept that strategic stability would require acceptance of mutual vulnerability. This came to be known as Mutually Assured Destruction (MAD – never was an acronym more apt). President Johnson, and Defense Secretary McNamara moved towards this initially, but it was Nixon and Kissinger who persuaded the Soviets. The idea was enshrined in two key arms control treaties – SALT (the Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty), and the Anti-Ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty.⁴⁷ These treaties sought to structure nuclear arsenals around what strategists call an “assured second strike capability” – a first strike could not take out enough of the victim’s nuclear forces to prevent an obliterating response.

While SALT got most of the attention, the ABM Treaty was arguably more important. It limited each side to one BMD at a specific point (neither worked). Beyond that, the development or deployment of BMD systems was banned, based on the grim logic of MAD.

Ambitious Military Projects Ever,” 5 November, 2025, at:

<https://www.economist.com/interactive/science-and-technology/2025/11/05/golden-dome-is-one-of-the-most-ambitious-military-projects-ever>

⁴⁵ Von Hippel, F., “US Expenditures on Ballistic Missile Defense Through Fiscal Year 2021,” 29 October, 2021, at: <https://sgs.princeton.edu/sites/default/files/2021-11/vonhippel-2021-BMD.pdf>

⁴⁶ Union of Concerned Scientists, “US Ballistic Missile Defense 1945 – Today,” 29 March, 2019, at: <https://www.ucs.org/resources/us-missile-defense-timeline>.

⁴⁷ US Department of State, *Interim Agreement between the United States of American and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics on Certain Measures with Respect to the Limitation of Strategic Offensive Arms*, signed on 26 May, 1972, at: <https://2009-2017.state.gov/t/isn/4795.htm>; and US Department of State, *Treaty between the United States of America and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics on the Limitation of Anti-Ballistic Missile Systems*, signed on 26 May, 1972, at: <https://2009-2017.state.gov/t/isn/trty/16332.htm>

If either side believed it had defences able to take out an enemy missile strike, the temptation to launch one's own first strike might grow; if one could destroy a sizable proportion of the enemy's nuclear force in a first strike, then a BMD system could defeat the enemy's weakened response. Leaving aside the reality that a first strike would be an insane risk, as one could never know that one's BMD would deal with the retaliation, such an attack would be theoretically possible. So, the SALT and ABM Treaties sought to structure nuclear arsenals around the requirements of secure second strikes and ban missile defences.

Not everyone accepted this. Some argued it was wrong to foreclose the possibility of BMD. The argument was ideological. MAD condemned the US to having to accept the Soviet Union (USSR). Even worse, it established equivalence between the two – they would be equally vulnerable – and made US survival dependent on a macabre mutual avoidance of suicide pact. On a political, ideological, and indeed a *moral* level, the idea that the existence of the US required the acquiescence of the Godless Soviets offended some. By the late 1970s, opponents of the SALT and ABM treaties, and the broader concept of détente, controlled the Republican Party with Ronald Reagan as leader. It did not matter that BMD was impossible. What mattered was that the US should not *accept* MAD, or any limitations on the effort to overcome it. Reagan's missile defence was about ideology, about an attempt to *will* an alternative to MAD into being.⁴⁸ As FitzGerald, in an acclaimed account of Reagan's BMD wrote, his pursuit of BMD proved “the extent to which our national discourse about foreign and defense policy is not about reality--or the best intelligence estimates about it--but instead a matter of domestic politics, history, and mythology.”⁴⁹

The basic problem for BMD is that physics is stubbornly resistant to ideology. It takes 30 minutes to send an ICBM around the world. A BMD must respond instantly, distinguish real warheads from decoys, track them at thousands of kilometers per hour and guide interceptor missiles (or, in more futuristic plans, lasers or particle beams) to them. This system has to be at peak readiness constantly and work 100% reliably the first time. No complex system has ever achieved this, but this is the standard because of the stakes. Stopping 90% of nuclear warheads is not enough. As McGeorge Bundy, National Security Advisor to Kennedy and Johnson noted, even ten bombs landing on heavily populated centres would be a “disaster

⁴⁸ For a discussion of this era see Freedman, L., *The Evolution of Nuclear Strategy*, 3rd Edition, Palgrave MacMillan, 2003, chapter 29, “SALT, Parity and the Critique of MAD.”

⁴⁹ FitzGerald, *op cit*, p. 18.

beyond history.”⁵⁰ A BMD must itself be invulnerable. For example, sensitive electronics in space can be “blinded” by a nuclear weapon detonated there; a phenomenon called “electro-magnetic pulse” (EMP).⁵¹ Having breached the wall of the castle, the remaining nuclear forces would flow through. So, these space-based assets must somehow be able to keep working in the face of attacks against them and no one knows how to do that.

Nor does BMD make sense if it can be overcome more cheaply than it can be built. Paul Nitze, one of the giants of the nuclear age famously concluded that BMD must be “cost effective at the margin;”⁵² it has to be cheaper for the defence to intercept missiles than it is for the offense to make them. This is where decoys and penetration aids come in; dummy warheads designed to force the system to fire interceptors uselessly, thereby overwhelming the defence and allowing large numbers of real warheads to get through. Decoys are cheap, compared to interceptors. The ongoing US-Israel war on Iran has illustrated the point very well. Iran’s missiles and drones are relatively cheap and plentiful compared to the interceptors fired at them by the US, Israel and the Gulf states, which have also come under attack. The interceptors also take much longer to produce; once fired, they cannot be as quickly replaced as Iran’s weapons seem to be. As the war has gone on, serious concerns have arisen that the stockpile of interceptors will run low, forcing defenders to let more and more missiles and drones through.⁵³

Missile defence may never be “cost effective at the margin” until so-called directed energy weapons (lasers and particle beams) can reliably intercept missiles. Such systems will be able to take unlimited shots, provided the energy source is unlimited, and the “cost per shot” will be negligible (though the cost of building them in the first place will be enormous). Experiments with futuristic weapons in highly controlled, short-range circumstances are underway, but, even for limited use, problems are still significant. Lasers don’t work as well

⁵⁰ McGeorge Bundy, “To Cap the Volcano,” *Foreign Affairs*, October 1969.

⁵¹ See Malekos Smith, Z.L., “The Spectre of EMP Weapons in Space,” *Carnegie Council*, 27 March, 2024, at <https://www.carnegiecouncil.org/media/article/the-specter-of-emp-weapons-in-space>; and Union of Concerned Scientists, “Space-Based Missile Defense,” 30 August, 2018, at: <https://www.ucs.org/resources/space-based-missile-defense-0>

⁵² Nitze, P.H., “On the Road to a More Stable Peace,” as reprinted in, U.S. Department of State, *Current Policy*, No. 675 (Washington, D.C.: Department of State, 1985), p. 2.

⁵³ See, for example, Kershner, I., “Israel’s Missile Defense Under Scrutiny After Iranian Attack,” *New York Times*, 22 March, 2026, at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2026/03/22/world/middleeast/israel-missile-defense-iran.html?searchResultPosition=10>

over longer ranges and can be obscured by atmospheric conditions, such as clouds and dust.⁵⁴ Israel has begun to deploy a laser supplement to the Iron Dome for short-range rockets, which shows promise, but has limitations.⁵⁵ As a defence against many ICBMs, lasers are many decades from deployment, if they can ever be perfected, particularly reliable lasers based in space.⁵⁶

Finally, even if a cost-effective BMD were possible, adversaries would not accept it. They would attack it, and build up their stock of nuclear weapons and missiles and develop delivery methods such as missiles which take different trajectories, more advanced cruise missiles or even ways of clandestinely smuggling nuclear weapons into an adversary. Because a missile defence, if your nuclear arsenal is the one being rendered useless by it, is not a defence; it is an act of offense which eliminates your deterrent and leaves you at the adversary's mercy. As Ankit Panda, of the Carnegie Endowment puts it; "if tomorrow we woke up and read in the papers that [Chinese leader] Xi Jinping had just authorized a Golden Dome for China that would render the U.S.'s ability to hit China with nuclear weapons moot, the U.S. would not see that as a defensive measure being taken by China."⁵⁷ An impervious Golden Dome, as Trump imagines it, would drive the nuclear arms race in new directions.⁵⁸

Canada's Previous Encounters with Missile Defence

Reagan's SDI in the 1980s and George W. Bush's project in the early 2000's, which came to be known as Ground-based Midcourse Defense (GMD), were different. Both times, Canada's military wanted to join (there has never been a large US defence project that Canada's military was not keen to join), but public opinion and other officials were reluctant.

⁵⁴ See Suciu, P., "US Navy Freaked Out: Lasers are no Magic Weapon to Take Down Missiles," *The National Interest*, 3 September, 2024, at:

<https://nationalinterest.org/blog/buzz/us-navy-freaked-out-lasers-are-no-magic-weapon-take-down-missiles-209172>

⁵⁵ Levaton, S. and Fabian, E., "Defense Ministry hands IDF first combat ready Iron Beam laser interception system," *The Times of Israel*, 28 December, 2025, at:

<https://www.timesofisrael.com/defense-ministry-hands-idf-first-combat-ready-iron-beam-laser-interception-system/>; and *The Economist*, "What is Israel's Iron Beam?" 13 November, 2023.

⁵⁶ Vergano, D., "Trump's Iron Dome Space Weapons Plan Ignores Physics," *Scientific American*, 19 February, 2025.

⁵⁷ Quoted in Grobe, A.M., "Trump's 'Golden Dome' Defense Plan: Would it Work? Is it Worth it?" *The Christian Science Monitor*, 10 June, 2025, at:

<https://www.csmonitor.com/USA/Military/2025/0606/trump-golden-dome-missile-defense>

⁵⁸ Moric, I., "Dome of Delusion: The Many Costs of Ballistic Missile Defence," *Arms Control Today*, June, 2025, at <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2025-06/features/dome-delusion-many-costs-ballistic-missile-defense>

SDI was an attempt to abolish MAD, based on an ideological revulsion to it. Reagan spoke grandly of futuristic defensive weapons in space which would make nuclear war obsolete and of sharing SDI with the Soviets. No one believed this, except perhaps Reagan. Moscow saw SDI as an attempt to undermine Russia's second strike capability. Reagan's invitation to join SDI put Prime Minister (PM) Mulroney in a difficult position. Simply dismissing SDI would not do, but it would suck up billions and was unpopular with Canadians. Mulroney's solution was to decline to join, but to refrain from criticizing SDI and to permit Canadian companies and researchers to participate in research if the US asked them. It was a "No – but" response. It allowed Mulroney to say "no" to an unpopular American idea, but not offend Reagan by rejecting SDI. More importantly, it showed Canadians that Mulroney could say "no" to the US, which protected him from charges that his real ambition, a free trade agreement, bespoke a desire to "sell out" Canadian sovereignty.⁵⁹

The Bush GMD system was much more limited. It envisaged small numbers of land-based interceptors. The Netflix drama *A House of Dynamite* shows this system and also that it is imperfect.⁶⁰ GMD's small number of interceptors do not undermine strategic stability. A large nuclear arsenal could easily overwhelm them. It is an attempt to develop a limited defence against the proliferation of nuclear weapons to smaller states that did not subscribe to the logic of MAD⁶¹ (though it was never explained why the North Korean regime would be less interested in its own survival than anyone else). The debate in Canada over GMD was fierce.⁶² The Canadian military argued that GMD was different than SDI, and was no threat to strategic stability, and that failure to join might imperil NORAD. Opponents, in the arms control world and at Canada's Foreign Affairs Department (now GAC), argued that *any* missile defence would undermine strategic stability, as defined by the SALT and ABM Treaties. In the end, the decision made by PM Martin was political, as both Bush and GMD were unpopular in key Liberal constituencies.⁶³ But even here, Martin pursued a "No – but" policy. To preserve NORAD, a compromise was fashioned. NORAD provides a critical part

⁵⁹ Brunet, L., "Canada's 'Polite No' to SDI: A Question of Sovereignty?" in *NATO and the Strategic Defense Initiative*, ed. Brunet, L., London: Routledge, 2022.

⁶⁰ See *Strategic Ballistic Missile Defense: Challenges to Defending the United States*, Report of the American Physical Society, February, 2025, at: <https://www.aps.org/publications/reports/strategic-ballistic-missile-defense>

⁶¹ Bush, G.W., *U.S. National Security Strategy: Prevent Our Enemies From Threatening Us, Our Allies, and Our Friends with Weapons of Mass Destruction*, Washington, 2001.

⁶² For a good overview see Richter, A., "The Missile Defence Debate: Beyond the Dialogue of the Deaf," *Policy Options*, September 2003.

⁶³ CBC News, "Canada Won't Join Missile Defence Plan," February 24, 2005, at: <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/canada-won-t-join-missile-defence-plan-1.541081>

of the missile tracking for GMD and Canada participates in that. It is only at the point that the decision is made to launch the interceptor missiles that it becomes entirely American. As the US Ambassador to Canada at the time put it, “We have this odd situation where the Canadians will participate at NORAD, detecting when the missile is launched, determining where it’s heading, and even if they determine it’s heading towards Canada, it’s at that point they’ll have to leave the room because they’re not participating.”⁶⁴

These cases are important for any understanding of Canada’s response to the Golden Dome. In both cases, we said no, but carefully, in a way calculated not to offend and leave doors open. Will this kind of subtlety work with Trump? But there is a deeper aspect to the GMD decision; did we miss something important by being so hung up on preserving an outdated definition of strategic stability as the foundation of all international security? Did we fail to really consider the fact that Bush’s GMD and Reagan’s SDI were fundamentally different?

The Golden Dome

On January, 27th 2025, President Trump signed Executive Order 14186; *The Iron Dome for America*.⁶⁵ The goal of the system, since renamed the “Golden Dome,” returns to SDI; an impenetrable defence against all ICBMs, but adds cruise missiles, hypersonics and others to the threats the system is supposed to counter. Though detailed plans are lacking for something supposed to be deployed before Trump leaves office,⁶⁶ thousands of space-based interceptors, and more thousands of land- and sea-based interceptors are envisaged. A first “layer” of thousands of space-based sensors and interceptors would circle the earth, detecting missile launches in real time and engaging the missiles as they rise through the atmosphere in their so-called “boost” phase. Next, a second layer consisting of a much more robust system of land and sea-based interceptors than Bush established will engage those missiles which get through to their so-called “mid-course” phase. Finally, a third layer of thousands more shorter-range land and sea-based interceptors will engage missiles and warheads as they

⁶⁴ Cited in Boese, W., “Canada Spurns Bush on Missile Defense,” *Arms Control Today*, April, 2005, at: <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2005-04/canada-spurns-bush-missile-defense>.

⁶⁵ White House, Executive Order 14186, *The Iron Dome for America*, 27 January, 2025, at: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/01/the-iron-dome-for-america/>

⁶⁶ Skibba, P., “What’s the Plan for ‘Golden Dome’? Even Experts Aren’t Sure,” *Scientific American*, 9 September, 2025, at: <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/u-s-golden-dome-missile-shield-is-short-on-details-but-not-on-cash/>

plunge towards earth in their so-called “terminal” phase. It is as unlikely to succeed as SDI was.⁶⁷

However, Golden Dome’s proponents say two developments since SDI are crucial in showing that it can be done.

The first is progress in defending against short-range missiles, such as Israel’s missile defence system, consisting of the “Iron Dome” and other systems which are designed to intercept longer-range threats to Israel. Why can’t we just scale this up to defend North America? The answer is that defending an area the size of New Jersey from mostly short-range rockets is not the same as defending North America from thousands of sophisticated ICBMs and decoys. As the Ukrainian defence minister explained in 2022 when asked why Ukraine did not buy the Iron Dome, “We all know the name Iron Dome, but even it does not give 100% protection. ... Iron Dome was built [for protection] against slow, low-altitude, low-impact missiles that were basically made in garages. Iron Dome does not protect against cruise and ballistic missiles.”⁶⁸ Iron Dome, and its associated systems have a success rate of around 90% against unsophisticated, short-range projectiles. It does not engage incoming fire it assesses as likely to land in an unimportant area. So, it is more accurate to say that it is 90% effective in cases where it engages. This is impressive, but it still leaves 10% of missiles fired at population centres getting through and an unknown number of missiles fired at areas the system regards as of lesser importance not even being engaged. Moreover, the Iron Dome can be overcome. On October 7, 2023 Hamas fired an enormous number of rockets at Israel and many got through. An Iron Dome interceptor costs between \$40,000 and \$50,000 US, while Hamas can manufacture crude rockets for about \$600.⁶⁹ Thus, even for a small-scale defence, Nitze’s “cost effective at the margin” formula still lies with the offense. Iron Dome engages large numbers of crude, short-range missiles. It has an important psychological effect; the sense of security it gives Israelis allows their political leaders to take risks they

⁶⁷ Debusmann, B., “Can Donald Trump Build the ‘Golden Dome’ Over the US?” *BBC News*, 23 May, 2025, at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cyvmj6mem70o>; and *The Economist*, “Golden Dome is One of the Most Ambitious Military Projects Ever,” 5 November, 2025, at: <https://www.economist.com/interactive/science-and-technology/2025/11/05/golden-dome-is-one-of-the-most-ambitious-military-projects-ever>

⁶⁸ “Israel’s Iron Dome won’t work against Russian missiles – Ukraine’s defense minister,” *Jerusalem Post Staff*, 10 July, 2022, at: <https://www.jpost.com/international/article-711680>

⁶⁹ Boyd, I., “Israel’s Iron Dome air defense system works well – here’s how Hamas got around it,” *University of Colorado at Boulder, College of Arts and Sciences*, 10 October, 2023, at: <https://www.colorado.edu/asmagazine/2023/10/13/israels-iron-dome-air-defense-system-works-well-heres-how-hamas-got-around-it>

might not otherwise. But it cannot defeat thousands of sophisticated warheads and decoys aimed at an exponentially larger geographic area.

The second technical development which proponents of the Golden Dome point to is the advent of cost-effective constellations of satellites. The new space private sector has led this charge, with companies such as Starlink launching thousands of small satellites which ring the world in previously impossible networks. Golden Dome proponents say that a network of thousands of small, space-based interceptors which can be launched and maintained in orbits all around the world to engage incoming missiles in their boost phase is now possible in a way it never was in the era of Reagan's SDI.⁷⁰ But, while these private networks are impressive, they are a fraction of what would be required for BMD.⁷¹ Little discussed by Golden Dome advocates, however, is the fact that placing key components of the system on tens of thousands of low earth orbit satellites invites its enemies to attack them. This opens the prospect of a battle in space in which tens of thousands of satellites would be attacked by equal numbers of weapons designed to blind them with an EMP, or to collide with them and destroy them. This raises the prospect of something known as the Kessler Syndrome, in which the debris of thousands of destroyed satellites would circle the earth in waves and render access to space impossible for generations.⁷² The weaponization of space is a violation of treaties that prohibit weapons there and a key reason several countries, including Canada, have resisted space-based missile defences for so long.

⁷⁰ For an example of this argument see Kennedy, F., "Golden Dome Analysis: Why the plan could work," *Aerospace America*, 2 April, 2025 at: <https://aerospaceamerica.aiaa.org/features/golden-dome-analysis/>

⁷¹ CBO, "Effects of Lower Launch Costs on Previous Estimates for Space-Based, Boost Phase Missile Defense," 5 May, 2025, at:

[https://www.cbo.gov/publication/61237#:~:text=By%20themselves%2C%20decreases%20in%20launch%20costs%20could,fall%20from%20\\$831%20billion%20to%20\\$542%20billion](https://www.cbo.gov/publication/61237#:~:text=By%20themselves%2C%20decreases%20in%20launch%20costs%20could,fall%20from%20$831%20billion%20to%20$542%20billion;); and American Physical Society Panel on Public Affairs, "Strategic Ballistic Missile Defense: Challenges to Defending the United States," American Physical Society, 2025, at: <https://www.aps.org/about/news/2025/03/corrected-report-ballistic-missile-defense>

⁷² Strickland, A., "Why 'Kessler Syndrome' could turn from a hypothetical to a space disaster reality," *CNN*, 4 January, 2025, at:

<https://www.cnn.com/2025/01/04/science/kessler-syndrome-science-newsletter-wt#:~:text=The%20scenario%2C%20in%20which%20space%20debris%20collides,%E2%80%94%20or%20for%20space%20missions%20to%20launch>; and Kelvey, J., "Understanding the misunderstood Kessler Syndrome," *Aerospace America*, 1 March, 2024, at: <https://aerospaceamerica.aiaa.org/features/understanding-the-misunderstood-kessler-syndrome/>

Canada and The Golden Dome

Publicly, aside from the sum Trump wants for membership in his new club, he has not outlined any specific role for Canada. But Canada's military has been preparing for BMD.⁷³ Much of this effort centres on an ongoing project to modernize NORAD. Canada committed \$40 billion to NORAD modernization in 2022, including a new Arctic over the horizon radar, and other sensor weapons and communications upgrades.⁷⁴ These will enable NORAD to counter new threats, such as hypersonic ballistic and cruise missiles which can be fired from submarines off the North American coast and traverse vast distances in very short times.⁷⁵ But NORAD modernization is also about enhancing the sensors necessary to track incoming ballistic missiles. Though NORAD itself still does not have the mission to try to shoot them down, enhancements to its ability to track them are of obvious use to anyone who does. The modernization pre-dates the Golden Dome, but missile defence is now at its centre. As the RCAF General in charge of Canada's aspect of NORAD modernization says, "Everything is related to Golden Dome."⁷⁶

The F35, meanwhile, serves a concept called Integrated Air and Missile Defence (IAMD) which blends traditional air defence and missile defence into a seamless whole.⁷⁷ Canada's 2024 Defence Update stated that IAMD is a core mission for Canada, including missile defence.⁷⁸ Defence Minister McGuinty, during a July 2025 visit to NORAD, further committed Canada to IAMD.⁷⁹ For the RCAF, the F35s are not simply fighters, their sensor

⁷³ John. G., "Canada has been working for years to prepare for Golden Dome, Air Force General says," *Globe and Mail*, 8 October, 2025, at:

<https://www.theglobeandmail.com/canada/article-canada-prepare-golden-dome-air-force-general/>

⁷⁴ For details see, Government of Canada Factsheet, "Funding for Continental Defence and NORAD Modernization," 21 July, 2022, at:

<https://www.canada.ca/en/department-national-defence/services/operations/allies-partners/norad/facesheet-funding-norad-modernization.html>.

⁷⁵ Gardner, F., "The race for the two-miles-a-second super weapons that Putin says turn targets into dust," *BBC News*, 21 August, 2025, at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cgeqjlq8gj4o>

⁷⁶ Gill, *op cit*.

⁷⁷ Charron, A., "Golden Dome and Canada: The 'New' Age of Integrated Air and Missile Defence," *CDA Institute Analysis*, 25 August, 2025, at:

<https://cdainstitute.ca/golden-dome-and-canada-the-new-age-of-integrated-air-and-missile-defence/>

⁷⁸ Government of Canada, *Our North Strong and Free: A Renewed Vision for Canada's Defence*, Ottawa, 2024, at:

<https://www.canada.ca/en/department-national-defence/corporate/reports-publications/north-strong-free-2024.html>. See the "Defending North America" section of the document for commitments to missile defence and IAMD.

⁷⁹ National Defence News Release "Minister McGuinty visits NORAD," 16 July, 2025, at:

<https://www.canada.ca/en/department-national-defence/news/2025/07/minister-mcguinty-visits-norad.html>

systems and ability to network with other platforms at sea and in space make them part of IAMD (provided the F35s work, of course). The Gripen's champions say it can do this, with suitable software modifications, particularly if paired with Saab's GlobalEye aircraft.⁸⁰ But the RCAF wants F35s because they are seamlessly interoperable with US F35s for IAMD. Canada is now committed to at least 16 F35s, and may buy more.

Beyond NORAD modernization, Canada's new surface warships, known as the *River* class, have been modified from their original design to incorporate an American radar (called AEGIS) which, along with a particular interceptor missile (which the ships could carry, but have not yet been bought), could play a role in backing up the GMD system. Though ostensibly incorporated for protection when on overseas deployments, this radar and interceptor missile combination mean the ships could provide mid-course and terminal phase interception of ballistic missiles. The ships will have Cooperative Engagement Capability; they can link to each other and to American ships such that the commander of one ship, Canadian or American, can order the firing of missiles from others. This creates a seamless network of missile defence platforms all directed by one commander. Thus, Canada's next generation warships could undertake missile defence as though they were US ships.⁸¹ The contract for the first three AEGIS ships is valued at \$8 billion (it will surely go up). It was signed days before Trudeau left office, when the country was focused on the Liberal leadership race and Parliament was not sitting. Like the initial tranche of F35s, we are committed to three ships.⁸² Eventually, the Navy envisages 15 in total.

Put Canada's F35s and the *River* class warships together with their American counterparts; operate them under command-and-control systems which make Canadian and US assets

⁸⁰ Gosselin-Malo, E., "Swedish air chief talks next-gen warplane, Gripen's anti-drone role," *Defense News*, 23 December, 2025, at:

<https://www.defensenews.com/global/europe/2025/12/23/swedish-air-chief-talks-next-gen-warplane-gripens-anti-drone-role/>

⁸¹ Brewster, M., "Canada's new frigates could take part in ballistic missile defence – if Ottawa says yes," *CBC News*, 24 December, 2019, at:

<https://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/frigate-ballistic-missile-defence-canada-1.5407226#:~:text=Canada's%20new%20frigates%20could%20take%20part%20in,avoided%20taking%20part%20in%20the%20U.S.%20program;>

Byers, M., "Canada has done a complete about-face on missile defence," *Globe and Mail*, 28 June, 2021, at:

<https://www.theglobeandmail.com/opinion/article-canada-has-done-a-complete-about-face-on-ballistic-missile-defence/>; and Dunlop, D., "A Potential Political Brawl Over BMD Capabilities on Canada's CSC Type 26 Frigates?" *Canadian Naval Review*, 27 November, 2023, at:

<https://www.navalreview.ca/2023/11/a-potential-political-brawl-over-bmd-capabilities-on-canadas-csc-type-26-frigates/>

⁸² Brewster, M., "Feds sign \$8b preliminary contract for new Navy destroyers while parliament sidelined," *CBC News*, 8 March, 2025, at: <https://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/new-frigates-navy-1.7478463>

essentially the same; throw in a modernized NORAD; add the enhanced US ground-based interceptor missiles and the space-based interceptors which are to be built under the Golden Dome; and you have the very definition of the network of sensor and interceptor platforms all linked in real time to a central command system that an Integrated Air and Missile Defence system envisages – you have the elements of ballistic missile defence. The Canadian Government states that no decision has been made on Canadian participation in missile defence. Anyone looking carefully at the kinds of weapons we are buying, the command systems for them, and the operational concepts we have committed to, such as IAMD, might wonder.

Is Canada's Missile Defence Decision an Opportunity?

Missile defence is not going away. The idea of finding some way to defend the sacred homeland is too deeply embedded in America's psyche. Also, leaving aside ideology, there is simply *too much money at stake* for America's military industrial complex to let go of the idea. A perfect missile defence may never be possible, but the search for one can be endlessly profitable.⁸³

But we should also acknowledge that the world is not what it was in the 1970s when Soviet-US MAD was the foundation of strategic stability and these two players were fundamentally risk averse. China is a new and different player. Putin's Russia seeks to redraw boundaries and is prepared to threaten nuclear use to do it. New nuclear entrants, such as North Korea and perhaps Iran one day, with missiles that can reach North America, are no longer a theoretical possibility. Arguing that 1970s-style MAD is the basis of strategic stability doesn't make much sense, and hasn't for a long time. Some, limited, missile defences may be appropriate against small-scale threats, even if they remain destabilising against others.

For Canada, the current moment is fraught. We seek to diversify trade and defence relations away from the US, but geography means that we cannot escape some form of continental missile defence. We want different relations with a Europe that likewise no longer trusts the US, while also forging our own way with China. But it is not an either/or situation: either we

⁸³ Maidenberg, M, FitzGerald, D and Tong, A., "Everyone Wants a Piece of Trump's 'Golden Dome' Defense Plan," *Wall Street Journal*, 4 May, 2025.

have close defence relations with the US, or we don't; either we forge new relations with Europe, or we don't; either we find a new way with China, or we don't. The world does not work that way. We need to do all of these things.

It is sometimes said that the beginning of true wisdom is developing the ability to hold two separate, even contradictory ideas in your head at the same time and act on them both. North American missile defence is likely to be one area where we have to find ways to collaborate with the US, even as we are going in other directions on other issues. Prime Minister Carney gave this a name in his Davos speech – variable geometry; “different coalitions for different issues, based on common values and interests.”⁸⁴

The debate the last two times we were asked to participate in an American missile defence project was binary; yes or no, and the framework of the debate in Canada was largely centered around whether any such defence would be destabilising to a concept of strategic stability still based largely on the logic of the 1972 ABM Treaty. The debate also took place in an environment where there were no continental missile defences. This time, there is already a limited missile defence system in existence and the logic of the ABM Treaty is more widely recognised as a thing of the past (this is not a value judgement, it is just a fact). In fact, the ABM Treaty itself no longer exists.

The question for Canada today is thus; what *kind* of participation, in what *kind* of missile defence?

Any consideration of options has to begin with the recognition that the Golden Dome's land- and sea-based components are basically developments of a system that already exists, Bush's GMD system. But the Golden Domes' weapons in space component does not already exist and is the most destabilizing aspect of the project, as well as its most fantasy-based. Can Canada avoid participating in the weapons in space part of the Golden Dome project until the Americans come to the conclusion that it is too expensive and unlikely to work and abandon it themselves? This is already beginning. In testimony before Congress on April 15, 2026, the General in charge of delivering the Golden Dome admitted that the space-based layer

⁸⁴ “Principled and pragmatic: Canada's path” Prime Minister Carney addresses the World Economic Forum Annual Meeting,” January 20, 2026, website of the Prime Minister of Canada at; <https://www.pm.gc.ca/en/news/speeches/2026/01/20/principled-and-pragmatic-canadas-path-prime-minister-carney-addresses>

might not make it into the final design of the project because it is just too expensive; “if boost-phase intercept from space is not affordable and scalable, we will not produce it.”⁸⁵

While we wait for the US to abandon Trump’s space fantasy, we would prepare to participate in the land-based and sea-based interceptor programmes, the advanced cruise missile interceptor capability, and the missile warning and tracking aspects, all via a modernized NORAD.

Frankly, that does seem to be what Canada is quietly preparing to do. This approach would buy time, avoid fueling an arms race in orbit, and open space for renewed arms-control diplomacy among the US, China, and Russia – probably, again, after Trump has left office. Participation in an enhanced version of Bush’s GMD, but avoiding Trump’s space-based addition to it, would be an argument for pragmatic engagement—accepting limited missile defence as reality against less than all-out nuclear strikes, while working to build a negotiated nuclear order, rather than chasing the fantasy of total invulnerability. Such a world would be more stable and in Canada’s interest.

Complex diplomacy would accompany the building of a new BMD system with the objective of working out the rules of the game for the US, China and Russia. It would be a return to the kind of diplomacy which characterized the era of SALT and ABM, but with three actors, and with an acceptance that limited defences are now tolerated. None of this will be easy. The basic concepts of how a three-way deterrent would function are unknown. What this will likely amount to will be three, individual nuclear dyads, based on limited defences against others which do not affect an agreed level of assured destruction between the three principals.

How Britain, France, and India would fit is also important—they will want an effective deterrent against states that concern them. India, for example, will not accept a system which denies its ability to deter China. The kind of multilayered diplomacy required to work this out will take years. While all this is going on, some in the US will decry the idea that any level of nuclear threat to America can be accepted, resurrecting the arguments of the Reagan era that

⁸⁵ Quoted in Roque, A., “Golden Dome czar signals space-based interceptors not guaranteed, as DOD weighs costs,” *Breaking Defense*, 15 April, 2026, at: <https://breakingdefense.com/2026/04/golden-dome-czar-signals-space-based-interceptors-arent-guaranteed-as-dod-weighs-cost/#:~:text=Guetein%2C%20appoint%20Golden%20Dome%20czar%20by%20President.about%20Golden%20Dome%20spending%20plans%20were%20discussed>; see also Pflughoeft, A., “Lawmakers seek more detail, cost information from Golden Dome project manager,” *Aerospace America*, 15 April, 2026, at: <https://aerospaceamerica.aiaa.org/lawmakers-seek-more-details-cost-information-from-golden-dome-program-manager/>

the US can never accept equivalence with morally inferior nations. The fantasy of an invulnerable US will not die, but does America have trillions of dollars to waste on this? It is prudent to assume that, once Trump has left office, the Golden Dome will be quietly scaled back the same way SDI was after Reagan left.

For Canada, while we would never be at the heart of the trilateral diplomacy that will be required to develop the new strategic order, is there a role in encouraging it, doing some of the intellectual spade work and seeing if there are multilateral aspects to a new nuclear order which we could encourage? This will take a long-term commitment of diplomatic resources and intellect.

Conclusion

The Golden Dome, as Trump envisages it, is nonsense, but is all missile defence necessarily bad? More importantly, can some form of enhanced, but limited missile defence realistically be stopped? Perhaps Canada needs to accept that limited missile defence is a reality. Instead of refusing to engage with what we cannot stop, maybe the time has come for Canada to ask what a stable world of limited missile defence would look like, and explore how we can help bring it about.

Essentially, what is being argued here is that we go back and revisit Paul Martin's decision not to participate in George W. Bush's limited missile defence project. Many have come to recognise this decision was a mistake, made more because of the politics of the moment and a flawed argument as to what strategic stability was and where strategic reality was going. In 2014, for example, the Canadian Senate's Standing Committee on National Security and Defence criticized the 2005 decision and recommended that Canada join GMD.⁸⁶ But, we should do this in such a way as to avoid all-in participation in all aspects of the Golden Dome and particularly the research into the weapons in space aspect of the Golden Dome project, which will, in reality, not happen at effective scale for decades, if it ever does. Trump is characteristically promising that Golden Dome will have large numbers of effective weapons in space before he leaves office, and the US military and defence contractors have been

⁸⁶ Senate of Canada, Standing Committee on National Security and Defence, *Canada and Ballistic Missile Defence; Responding to the Evolving Threat*, June, 2014, at: <https://sencanada.ca/content/sen/committee/412/secd/rep/rep10jun14-e.pdf>

bravely saying (if only to keep Trump happy) that they can meet this timeline, but some are now admitting that this is extremely unlikely. They will also say that it is not possible for Canada to join missile defence à la carte; that the system requires full participation or none. But the “system” does not exist yet. Militaries are used to working with allies who participate in some aspects of a system or an operation, but not in others. The Golden Dome system, and Canada’s participation in it, can be designed however it is decided.

All of this will require patient, adroit and sophisticated diplomacy on our part. Trump may be expected to loudly insist that we go all-in on all aspects of his Golden Dome vision. But Trump won’t be in office by early 2029. And, unless he manages to rig the mid-term elections, he will likely lose control of Congress – and therefore of the funding for all of this – this fall. We can wait this out. The full Golden Dome project may take 30 years, if it ever happens at all. Canada can agree to help construct the things that make sense today, and that we are basically quietly doing now. These include modernising NORAD to prepare for limited ballistic missile attacks and the threat of more sophisticated cruise missiles. In the meantime, we can say that we will leave consideration of Donald Trump’s space fantasies for later – much, much, much, much later.

Could Canada be a Nuclear Player, Again?⁸⁷

Recent upheavals prompt thoughts that would have seemed preposterous a short time ago. We hear that our Department of Defence is “modelling” what a US invasion of Canada might look like.⁸⁸ A former Canadian Chief of Defence Staff says that we should keep our “options open” with respect to the idea of building our own nuclear deterrent.⁸⁹ Anyone who had been asleep for a year and woke up would think the world had gone mad. They would be right.

One of the key developments is the loss of confidence that the United States will honour Article V under the NATO Treaty.⁹⁰ Article V is the promise to come to the aid of an ally under attack. Indeed, there is now a fear, apparently put aside for the moment as far as Greenland is concerned, that the US might *itself* attack (or coerce) its own allies.⁹¹ This raises monumental questions for the rest of NATO. One of these is whether the US nuclear guarantee, the ultimate expression Article V, is still worth anything.⁹² In a study prepared for the 2026 Munich Security Conference a group of experts on European security openly questioned the American nuclear guarantee and pondered Europe’s possible responses, including an independent deterrent.⁹³

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⁸⁷ An earlier version of this paper first appeared in *The Walrus* online on March 5, 2026. It is reprinted here by permission of *The Walrus*.

⁸⁸ Fife, R. and John, G., “Military models Canadian response to hypothetical American invasion,” *Globe and Mail*, 20 Jan, 2026, at:

<https://www.theglobeandmail.com/politics/article-military-models-canadian-response-to-hypothetical-american-invasion/>

⁸⁹ Chase, S., “Canada should ‘keep our options open’ on acquiring nuclear weapons, former defence chief says,” *Globe and Mail*, 2 Feb, 2026, at:

<https://www.theglobeandmail.com/politics/article-wayne-eyre-nuclear-weapons-canada/>

⁹⁰ See Mao, F., “Can Europe still count on the US coming to its defence?” *BBC News*, 25 Feb, 2025, at:

<https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c011w1w41xzo>

⁹¹ Jakes, L., “If the US were to invade Greenland, ‘NATO would be stuck,’” *New York Times*, 14 Jan, 2026, at:

<https://www.nytimes.com/2026/01/14/world/europe/trump-greenland-nato.html>

⁹² Gwadera, Z., “US allies question extended deterrence guarantees, but have few options,” *International Institute for Strategic Studies*, 20 March, 2025, at:

<https://www.iiss.org/online-analysis/military-balance/2025/03/us-allies-question-extended-deterrence-guarantees-but-have-few-options/>

⁹³ *Mind the Deterrence Gap: Assessing Europe’s Nuclear Options*, Report of the European Nuclear Study Group, Feb, 2026, at:

https://securityconference.org/assets/02_Dokumente/01_Publikationen/2026/ENSG/Mind_the_Deterrence_Gap%E2%80%93Report_of_the_ENSG.pdf

Doubts about the American nuclear guarantee are not new. Fundamentally, deterrence rests not only on the possession of nuclear weapons, but on the perception of an enemy that a country would actually use them. French President Charles de Gaulle famously justified France's quest for an independent nuclear deterrent by asking whether the US would trade New York for Paris; in *extremis*, would a US President launch American nuclear missiles to defend a European country, knowing that it would invite a devastating response against America?⁹⁴ Though no British PM ever posited the matter in these stark terms, ever mindful of the "special relationship" with the US, these considerations were partially behind Britain's search for its own deterrent.⁹⁵

Nuclear strategists refer to this as the question of "extended deterrence;" can a country which has nuclear weapons, and therefore has a deterrent against nuclear attacks upon itself, credibly "extend" that deterrence to other countries by promising to use its nuclear weapons to defend them as well? Are such promises believable? *Would* the US sacrifice New York to defend Paris?

During the Cold War, NATO sought to reassure its European members and to prevent more European countries establishing their own nuclear deterrents in what might have led to an uncontrolled spiral of nuclear proliferation.⁹⁶ Sweden pursued nuclear weapons in the 1960s, until reassured by the US (even though Sweden was not part of NATO then), and there have been hints that Germany did as well. Further afield, Japan and South Korea have also explored these options. All of them put these nuclear research programmes aside, or at least into a deep freeze, when the US made clear that it was prepared to extend its deterrent to guarantee their safety.⁹⁷

One of the methods used to extend deterrence are "dual key" arrangements. To this day, certain Allied forces have US nuclear weapons, but *both* the ally and the US have to authorize their use in a crisis; there are two "keys" to be turned to release the weapons, one

⁹⁴ See "Memorandum of Conversation, Paris, May 31, 1961," *United States Department of State, Office of the Historian*, at: <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1961-63v14/d30>

⁹⁵ Wheeler, N. J., "British Nuclear Weapons and Anglo-American Relations 1945–54," *International Affairs*, Winter 1985-86, 62 (1).

⁹⁶ Fink, A.L., "U.S. Extended Deterrence and Regional Nuclear Capabilities," *Congressional Research Service, In Focus*, 6 Feb, 2026, at: <https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/IF12735>

⁹⁷ Bradley, J., "Preventing the Nuclear Jungle; Extended Deterrence, Assurance and Nonproliferation," *National Defense University, Joint Force Quarterly*, 112, Feb 2024, at: https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Portals/68/Documents/jfq/jfq-112/jfq-112_70-75_Bradley.pdf

held by America and one by the host nation.⁹⁸ Though not the same as these countries having their own deterrents, NATO allies thus do have nuclear capability. It also “spreads the load” in that US forces in Europe would not be the only ones firing nuclear weapons in a war; the Russians have to contend with the fact that such weapons could come at them from several sources. Since the host nation did not develop, nor does it fully control, the nuclear weapons, it can maintain that it is not violating the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT) – a bit of a stretch, but one that has proved just about workable.⁹⁹ Recently, Russia did its own version of a dual key transfer to its ally Belarus, under arrangements reportedly similar to those employed by NATO nations.¹⁰⁰

Few Canadians know it today, but Canada had dual key nuclear weapons during the Cold War, for both NATO and NORAD missions. American nuclear weapons were stored on Canadian military bases; guarded by Canadian troops; Canadian personnel trained regularly to use them; and procedures were worked out for Canadian and American personnel to release them, if ordered to.¹⁰¹ Canada’s nuclear role in Europe ran from the early 60s until the early 70s and our nuclear role in NORAD from the early 60s to the early 80s. Canada had nuclear weapons, though not an independent deterrent, and with considerable public controversy along the way.¹⁰²

In both cases, these nuclear weapons were not of the type that would have attacked the Soviet Union, but rather existed to disrupt Soviet forces that were attacking NATO or North America. Canada thus did *not* play a role in deterrence in the commonly understood

⁹⁸ Mattelaer, A., “Nuclear Sharing and NATO as a Nuclear Alliance,” in S. Fruhling and A. O’Neil, (eds.), *Alliances, Nuclear Weapons and Escalation*, ANU Press, 2021, at:

<https://www.egmontinstitute.be/app/uploads/2021/12/ch11.pdf?type=pdf>

⁹⁹ Kutt, M. P. Podvig and Z. Mian, “Bombs away: Confronting the deployment of nuclear weapons in non-nuclear weapon countries,” *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientist*, 28 July, 2023, at:

[https://thebulletin.org/2023/07/bombs-away-confronting-the-deployment-of-nuclear-weapons-in-non-nuclear-weapon-countries/#:~:text=Under%20NPT%20articles%20and%20%2C%20respectively%2C,or%20explosive%20devices%20directly%2C%20or%20indirectly%20\(&text=\)%20and%20similarly%20%60%60each%20non%2Dnuclear%2Dweapon%20state%20party,weapons%20or%20explosive%20devices%20directly%2C%20or%20indirectly](https://thebulletin.org/2023/07/bombs-away-confronting-the-deployment-of-nuclear-weapons-in-non-nuclear-weapon-countries/#:~:text=Under%20NPT%20articles%20and%20%2C%20respectively%2C,or%20explosive%20devices%20directly%2C%20or%20indirectly%20(&text=)%20and%20similarly%20%60%60each%20non%2Dnuclear%2Dweapon%20state%20party,weapons%20or%20explosive%20devices%20directly%2C%20or%20indirectly)

¹⁰⁰ Kelly, L. and A. Osborne, “Belarus starts taking delivery of Russian nuclear weapons,” *Reuters*, 14 June, 2023, at:

<https://www.reuters.com/world/europe/belarus-has-started-taking-delivery-russian-tactical-nuclear-weapons-president-2023-06-14/>

¹⁰¹ Bercuson, D.J., “The Canadian farmboy ready to unleash nuclear hell during the Cold War,” *National Post*, 14 Oct., 2024, at:

<https://nationalpost.com/news/the-canadian-farmboy-ready-to-unleash-nuclear-hell-during-the-cold-war>

¹⁰² Noakes, T., “Canada and Nuclear Weapons,” *The Canadian Encyclopedia*, 19 Nov., 2025, at:

<https://thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/canada-and-nuclear-weapons> See also Maloney, S., *Learning to Love the Bomb: Canada’s Nuclear Weapons During the Cold War*, Potomac Books, 2007.

“strategic” sense that would involve a nuclear strike against the USSR. Our role was in being part of an allied effort to deter a Soviet attack against the West at the so-called “tactical” level by demonstrating the resolve and preparedness to use nuclear weapons against the attacking forces themselves. It is an important nuance, though there has been a fierce debate over the years as to whether the pristine break between “tactical” and “strategic” nuclear weapons could be maintained in a conflict, or whether any tactical use would quickly and inevitably escalate to all-out nuclear war.¹⁰³

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Now, ponder the question of whether reprising this role today, though in a different way, might make sense. Because, if the European allies doubt whether the US would honour its Article V commitment should Putin ever coerce or attack a NATO country, how are those allies going to respond, both conventionally and, if necessary, in nuclear terms? Putin’s nuclear sabre rattling over Ukraine has shown that Russia is prepared to use nuclear threats to deter conventional reactions to its aggression. European countries have continued to support Ukraine with conventional arms transfers because they rely on America to deter Russia from actually doing anything. But what if Putin threatens an ally and Europe’s NATO countries do not believe they can rely on the US?

Of course, a substantial build-up in conventional forces is the most obvious response to this threat, and European countries are beginning to do just that. But what if Putin threatens to use nuclear weapons to achieve his ends? How would “Europe” respond to that if the American deterrent was uncertain? In nuclear terms there are at least two scenarios. One is that individual European countries develop their own nuclear deterrent to replace the US. Expect Germany, Poland and Sweden to do so, if it ever comes to this.¹⁰⁴ More likely is the creation of some form of a “European” deterrent, developed, controlled and shared by several countries. Europe’s two nuclear powers, France and the UK, are reportedly deepening their nuclear cooperation and experts are discussing this idea.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰³ *Union of Concerned Scientists*, “What are Tactical Nuclear Weapons?” 1 June, 2022, at: <https://www.ucs.org/resources/tactical-nuclear-weapons>

¹⁰⁴ *Nordic Defence Review*, “The Bomb is Back: Allied Democracies are Re-opening the Nuclear File,” Feb, 2026 at, <https://nordicdefencereview.com/the-bomb-is-back-allied-democracies-are-reopening-the-nuclear-file/>

¹⁰⁵ *The Economist*, “Can Europe do nuclear deterrence without America? Britain and France are deepening their cooperation,” 2 Feb, 2026 at: <https://www.economist.com/europe/2026/02/02/can-europe-do-nuclear-deterrence-without-america>. See also, International Institute for Strategic Studies Forum, “Towards a European Nuclear Deterrent,” *Survival*, 27

A European nuclear force would require a significantly expanded French deterrent, which other European nations would access through a dual key arrangement. The UK nuclear force might also take part, but their nuclear force is more dependent on the US than France's. If London were to contribute to a truly independent European force, it would have to develop a warhead and delivery system which it controlled entirely. There has been discussion in Britain of the possibility of the US withdrawing its support to the British deterrent (or requiring Britain to pay too high a price in terms of subservience) and what might happen if it did.¹⁰⁶ So the question of where the nuclear weapons would come from is reasonably clear; France and, possibly, Britain. Less clear, however, is what the decision-making process would be; how would nuclear weapons decisions get made by the countries involved in this deterrent force, both in normal circumstances and a crisis?

In his recent landmark speech on French nuclear strategy, President Macron made the most explicit statement yet of willingness to bring other European nations under the French nuclear umbrella.¹⁰⁷ He promised an increase in the number of French nuclear weapons. He rejected, for now, the idea of dual keys, stating that French weapons will always be entirely on French platforms, but he did speak of much more intense cooperation between France and other European nations on nuclear issues. This includes the idea of basing French aircraft carrying nuclear weapons at airbases in other European countries; the joint development of new deep strike weapons; and significant planning and training to employ French nuclear weapons as part of a coordinated European warfighting strategy.¹⁰⁸

Other European nations, while welcoming this, and recognising that it is as far as France is ready to go right now, have indicated it may not go far enough. The German Chancellor has spoken of his hope that German aircraft will one day carry French nuclear weapons under dual key controls. The Polish President has indicated that his country will likely seek its own

September, 2024, at:

<https://www.iiss.org/online-analysis/survival-online/2024/09/forum-towards-a-european-nuclear-deterrent/>

¹⁰⁶ Quinn, B., "US support to maintain UK's nuclear arsenal is in doubt, experts say," *The Guardian*, 8 Mar, 2025, at:

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/mar/08/us-support-uk-nuclear-arsenal-in-doubt-trident-france>

¹⁰⁷ The speech was delivered on March 2, 2026. The text can be found at:

<https://uk.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/president-delivers-speech-frances-nuclear-deterrence>

¹⁰⁸ Analysis of the speech may be found at Witney, N., "Under my parapluie: Macron's nuclear guarantee for Europe," European Council on Foreign Relations, 17 March, 2026, at:

<https://ecfr.eu/article/under-my-parapluie-macrons-nuclear-guarantee-for-europe/>

weapons if this is as far as France will ultimately go. Pressure may yet grow on France to consider a version of NATO's dual key arrangements.¹⁰⁹

What are the implications for Canada, should that happen? A G7 nation with a highly professional military (which is about to get a lot of money) and experience of dual key controls, Canada might want to declare full commitment to European defence in a post-NATO world, including re-opening bases there. No other single act would more fully demonstrate that commitment—nor make as strong a case for a privileged trade relationship, a key Canadian imperative—than re-establishing our military presence in Europe and perhaps even taking part in the new nuclear arrangement which is emerging in Europe. If Canada were to buy some European fighter jets it could control fully, rather than only the F35, which will always ultimately remain subject to American oversight, and base some of the planes in Europe, as it did during the Cold War, they could serve as a potential delivery system, much as Canada's aircraft once did for NATO, if a new dual key arrangement emerged in Europe.

Of course, we are a very long way from this. As noted, France is not yet ready for a dual key arrangement. More generally, creating a European deterrent will be highly complex and expensive.¹¹⁰ Decision-making structures, weapons development—all of it would require extensive debate and significant investment. NATO's Secretary General has bluntly criticized the notion that Europe could ever be completely independent of the US in this area.¹¹¹ But serious people in Europe are looking at this as the possible direction. They want a continued nuclear deterrent against a resurgent Russian threat, and wonder, as de Gaulle did, if the US will actually provide it.

The German Chancellor floated the idea of a European deterrent in a January speech to the German Parliament.¹¹² A few weeks later, at the Munich Security Conference, after

¹⁰⁹ This is the conclusion reached by Gwadera, Z. and A. Bollfrass, "French nuclear deterrence: *Vive l'évolution*," International Institute for Strategic Studies, 12 March, 2026 at: <https://www.iiss.org/online-analysis/missile-dialogue-initiative/2026/03/french-nuclear-deterrence-vive-levoluti-on/>

¹¹⁰ Besch, S. and Bartoux, A., "Can Europe Build its own Nuclear Umbrella?" *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 3 April, 2025, at: <https://carnegieendowment.org/emissary/2025/04/can-europe-build-its-own-nuclear-umbrella>

¹¹¹ Liboreiro, J., "Rutte faces backlash for telling Europeans to 'keep on dreaming' about independence from US security," *EuroNews*, 27 Jan., 2026, at: <https://www.euronews.com/my-europe/2026/01/27/rutte-faces-backlash-for-telling-europeans-to-keep-on-dreaming-about-independence-from-us->

¹¹² Reuters, "Merz says Germany exploring shared nuclear umbrella with European allies," 29 Jan, 2026, at: <https://www.reuters.com/business/aerospace-defense/merz-says-germany-exploring-shared-nuclear-umbrella-wit>

acknowledging the international rules-based order “no longer exists,” Merz said discussions were continuing and expressed hope that such a deterrent would remain inside NATO and that Germany would respect its NPT obligations. (In this context, he likely means a dual-key system in which France, legally recognized as a nuclear-armed state, would build and formally own the weapons, while Germany and other allies would share a role in how they are used.)¹¹³

One of the things to be worked out is what *kind* of a deterrent an independent European nuclear force would be. As noted earlier, the dual key nuclear forces which began during the Cold War are primarily “tactical;” they employ smaller nuclear weapons against invading Russian forces. But they were not meant to devastate Russia in a “strategic” sense; that is, wider, direct retaliation for nuclear strikes against European cities. This was primarily left to the US, though the French and British do have a comparatively small strategic deterrent role. A new, independent European nuclear force would, presumably, seek to somehow fulfil both deterrent roles. For now, this issue is moot in that President Macron has stated that France does not recognise any boundary between tactical and strategic nuclear use. But the question of escalation from small weapons used to blunt a conventional attack and weapons fired from French submarines against Russia proper is going to arise.

Should this go ahead, with Canada seeking to be a part of it, there are very serious matters to ponder. Public opinion would need to be cultivated if a dual key role is reprised, though Canadian views on defence are shifting rapidly in the Trump era.¹¹⁴ Ownership of the weapons and command-and-control arrangements would have to be carefully worked out. Presumably, there would be a high-level advisory group on nuclear issues in the new post-NATO nuclear alliance. In practice, however, Britain and France may have a slightly more equal voice, if they are the ones building the weapons.

[h-european-allies-2026-01-29/#:~:text=Merz's%20comments%20were%20echoed%20by,Mackenzie%20Editing%20by%20Gareth%20Jones](#)

¹¹³ Wintour, P., “US ‘not powerful enough to go it alone,’ Merz tells conference,” *The Guardian*, 13 Feb, 2026, at:

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2026/feb/13/us-not-powerful-enough-to-go-it-alone-merz-tells-munich-conference>; and Tankersley, J., “Germany’s leader says his country is in discussions with France on a European nuclear deterrent,” *New York Times*, 13 Feb, 2026 at:

<https://www.nytimes.com/live/2026/02/13/world/munich-security-conference#germanys-leader-says-his-country-is-in-discussions-with-france-on-a-european-nuclear-deterrent>

¹¹⁴ Nanos, N., “Data Dive with Nik Nanos: Canadians are clamouring for a stronger military,” *Globe and Mail*, 12 February, 2026, at:

<https://www.theglobeandmail.com/opinion/article-data-dive-with-nik-nanos-canadians-are-clamouring-for-a-stronger/>

The relationship between the tactical level of an independent deterrent, in which Canada could be directly involved, and the strategic level of deterrence—and who decides when nuclear use escalates from one level to the other— might be the most complex issue to be addressed. If they were the ones who built and maintained the deterrent, would Britain and France give their European partners a real say in whether a nuclear conflict in Europe begins and when it escalates from a tactical-level nuclear exchange to a strategic one in which their cities are targets? Would London and Paris transfer the decision to launch nuclear weapons to some sort of higher European command?

French President Macron has already flatly said no, saying the decision “has always been and will remain in the hands of the President of the Republic.”¹¹⁵ Unless this changes, discussions over how Europe will coordinate nuclear decisions in a crisis will likely come down to some sort of French, or Franco-British command, into which others would have inputs but no decisive say.

All this may reveal, to paraphrase de Gaulle, whether France is ready to sacrifice Paris to defend Warsaw. There is a reason why NATO’s Secretary General has told Europeans to “keep on dreaming” if they think a fully independent European defence is possible.¹¹⁶ Or, the realisation that London and Paris may never fully share nuclear decision-making could prompt Germany, Poland and others to once again explore their own nuclear options. *That* would give everyone pause.

For Canada, another question would be how to sustain some form of North American defence cooperation with the United States, even if Washington were to renounce NATO at some point in the future. If the US does substantially decouple itself from Europe militarily, Canada will have to consider how to be part of two increasingly separate defence arrangements, simultaneously.

¹¹⁵ Emmanuel Macron, “Déclaration de M. Emmanuel Macron, Président de la République, sur la Guerre en Ukraine et l’Europe de la Défense, à Paris le 5 Mars 2025,” at: <https://www.vie-publique.fr/discours/297608-emmanuel-macron-05032025-conflit-en-ukraine-europe-de-la-defense>

¹¹⁶ Rankin, J., “‘Keep on dreaming:’ could Europe really defend itself without the US?” *The Guardian*, 31 Jan, 2026, at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2026/jan/31/european-defence-disarray-future-nato-trump>

Up to now, we have regarded membership of both NATO and NORAD as reinforcing commitments. By helping to defend North America, we were ensuring that it would be able to come to the aid of Europe. Given we have always sought to avoid being locked up in North America with only the US as an overwhelming partner—and saw a trans-Atlantic alliance as a way to avoid that—our membership in whatever emerges in Europe, if NATO goes into terminal decline will still be evidence of our looking to have wider defence alliances than just with the US, even as we continue to work with them to secure North America. Mark Carney’s idea of variable geometry; “different coalitions for different issues, based on common interests and values,” will be given a real workout here.¹¹⁷

And, of course, an American separation from the defence of Europe, if it happens, probably won’t be a clean break, but rather a messy and prolonged process. One can imagine an on-again, off-again relationship over a few decades as Administrations change back and forth.

Those on both sides of the Atlantic who cannot fathom the possibility of a new order of things will cling to the hope that the old days can return. Deeply entrenched institutional and individual powers will fight against any acceptance of a trans-Atlantic split, even as it is happening. But a slow, piecemeal American withdrawal from Europe would erode Washington’s nuclear guarantee over time. Even if it still remained formal policy during this period that America would extend deterrence to Europe, fewer and fewer would believe it and the effect would be the same as a withdrawal of the pledge. Some believe this is already happening as Trump openly questions whether he would come to Europe’s aid in a crisis.¹¹⁸ His more recent musings about NATO being “useless” for America in the wake of several allies’ refusal to join his war of choice against Iran only add to a growing feeling that a split has already happened in practice.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁷ “Principled and pragmatic: Canada’s path” Prime Minister Carney addresses the World Economic Forum Annual Meeting,” January 20, 2026, website of the Prime Minister of Canada at: <https://www.pm.gc.ca/en/news/speeches/2026/01/20/principled-and-pragmatic-canadas-path-prime-minister-carney-addresses>

¹¹⁸ *Mind the Deterrence Gap: Assessing Europe’s Nuclear Options*, Report of the European Nuclear Study Group, Feb, 2026, at: https://securityconference.org/assets/02_Dokumente/01_Publikationen/2026/ENSG/Mind_the_Deterrence_Gap%E2%80%93Report_of_the_ENSG.pdf

¹¹⁹ Troianovski, A., “NATO Labors to Avoid Becoming Another Casualty of the Iran War,” *New York Times*, 9 April, 2026, at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2026/04/09/us/politics/trump-iran-nato-rutte.html>

On the other hand, though they have spent years castigating the Europeans for not stepping up on defence, Americans may not much like a Europe which really is independent on these matters. Decisions about nuclear war and peace in Europe will inevitably affect American security in a fundamental way. Washington may not be prepared to really let the Europeans go off on their own. We thus may be about to find out if decades of American calls for Europe to “do more” have been primarily about seeking greater European financial commitment to common defence, but with continued subservience to American leadership, or if the US really is prepared to live in a world where Europe is a more independent actor on the world stage, including, possibly, a more independent nuclear actor at all levels of deterrence.

Washington may find that it is easy to say the Europeans aren’t doing enough, but that the real implications of watching them drift off are not palatable. To some extent, America’s bluff may well be called and Washington may live to regret Trump having pushed the Europeans too far.

It is necessary, under these circumstances, for Canada to clearly lay out what we want to do in terms of a contribution to European security, including its nuclear security, even if America’s commitment waxes and wanes over a period of years.

If a new European deterrent emerges from the talks underway between France, Germany and others, and it is nominally linked to NATO, as Germany’s Chancellor says he hopes, Canadian participation could be seen both as a part of our NATO commitment as well as a step toward a future defence of Europe more independent of the US. These things need not be portrayed as mutually exclusive. If the US really did eventually and substantively leave European defence, this new deterrent could evolve organically into a truly post-NATO arrangement, rather than emerge from a sudden split.

None of this is certain. There are very good reasons why the idea of a European deterrent—which would likely really be a French, or a Franco-British project to which others would contribute, but not have a decisive say in a crisis—may come to naught. Despite a lot

of brave talk on both sides of the Atlantic, both Europeans and Americans may find themselves getting very cold feet when the implications of all this start to become real.

But it could happen. Perhaps, even as they are “modelling” an unthinkable US invasion of Canada, our defence planners should also “model” something equally unthinkable: the return of active Canadian involvement at the sharp end of nuclear deterrence.

Epilogue: How *Would We Actually* Defend Ourselves?¹²⁰

What to make of a United States which threatens the sovereign territory of an allied democracy, in this case Denmark? Which invades another country to snatch its head of state and then makes the rest of the regime “an offer it can’t refuse” with respect to its oil resources? Where the head of the central bank faces bogus criminal charges for not allowing the Head of State to meddle where he is not allowed to by law? Or in which gangs of masked government thugs roam the streets, picking up anyone they wish and consigning them, with seemingly no due process, to a semi-legal hell-on-earth—and even shooting citizens who get in their way with seeming impunity?

It is almost beyond comprehension, as is the fact that the entire American political and judicial system has simply *stood back and let this happen*. This is, after all, a system founded on separate but equal branches of government whose primary function is to check one another and prevent the rise of the kind of despotic monarch Americans rejected when they handed in their British citizenship.

This state of affairs prompts one to think the unthinkable. We now live in a time, where, even if something remains highly unlikely, it is no longer *impossible*. And so, as Trump continues his semi-invasion/proxy take-over of Venezuela, and continues to grumble about Greenland, my thoughts turn to an unsettling question: could we Canadians actually defend ourselves if our restive neighbour to the south decided to test, once again, Thomas Jefferson’s maxim, propounded in 1812, that taking Canada “would be a mere matter of marching.”

Much of the analysis would depend on the related questions of *why* the Americans would go about invading us, and *how* they would do it. On the question of *why*, Trump’s essentially mercurial personality makes it difficult to base an answer entirely on the presumption of rationality. If Canada’s relations with him deteriorate to the point that he is seriously thinking that military action is a possibility, that point will probably come after an acrimonious exchange over something like his desire to own our resources and/or control our Arctic—in both cases for reasons of “national security.” Presumably we will have refused to accede to a

¹²⁰An earlier version of this paper first appeared in *The Walrus* online on February 6, 2026. It is reprinted here by permission of *The Walrus*.

set of egregious demands, and he will see unsubtle threats of possible military action (likely expressed according to the “everything is on the table” formula) as a way to soften us up. In this telling, Trump’s actions are best seen as an example of amoral, hard-nosed bargaining.

But deeper psychological imperatives cannot be dismissed, including a desire to be viewed by history as the man who more than doubled the size of the US and accomplished its “manifest destiny.” This is a goal that American leaders have sought since before the Revolutionary War.¹²¹ The first Continental Congress, in 1774, even before it declared independence, approved an open letter to the residents of what would become Canada imploring them to join, *or else*; “You are a small people, compared to those who with open arms invite you into a fellowship, ... A moment’s reflection should convince you which will be most for your interest and happiness, to have all the rest of North-America your unalterable friends, or your inveterate enemies.” In 1775, the fledgling forces of what would become the United States did try to invade Canada, but were pushed back. They would try again in 1812.

On the question of *how* the Americans might invade Canada, it is obvious that, if they decided to pull the full “shock and awe” special by unleashing the full might of their military against the Canadian public, we would be up the proverbial creek. But it seems unlikely they would do this. Our cities and infrastructure are valuable and would have to be expensively rebuilt after the conquest; why bomb them? Moreover, if the purported political cover story for all this is that the Americans are, by making us Americans, merely doing that which we Canadians have always secretly longed for, hammering us would seem a bit counter-intuitive. It is tough to make the argument that we are on the cusp of becoming the “cherished 51st State” when the bombs are falling. So, an all-out military invasion is probably not in store.

In terms of the diplomatic prelude to a take over, Trump’s negotiating style does display some traits that are, at least, consistent. When he really wants something and the other side has said it won’t budge, his first move is to punch them in the face, verbally at least, and then demand something preposterous. The bargaining starts from there. Thus, one imagines that the Americans would eventually “make us an offer we can’t refuse” in the form of a final demand over whatever it was that was being negotiated over, backed up by steadily graduated

¹²¹ For more see Drohan, M., *He Did Not Conquer; Benjamin Franklin’s Failure to Annex Canada*, Dundurn Press, 2025.

pressure in the form of ever more outlandish statements and threats designed to sap our will and cause us to voluntarily see the light.

Most of this, as Trump has promised, would be economic in nature, with a generous dose of disinformation, cyber and other such “soft” attacks thrown in, all intended to disrupt our economy and national life and to get us to question the reality that is unfolding before us. Almost certainly, it would involve support for separatism in Alberta to try to weaken Canada and create an argument that the Make America Great Again (MAGA) philosophy has supporters here. This has already begun with the recent comments of the US Treasury Secretary gently encouraging Alberta separatism.¹²² But one can imagine a bit of physical intimidation to help us get the point. This could come in the form of raids across the border by units of the US military to destroy some things or maybe capture a leader or two.

But it could also come in the form of irregular forces coming over to stir things up. When Vladimir Putin first invaded Ukraine in 2014, regular Russian troops were preceded by what were known as the “little green men;” special forces troops in camouflage, but without any official insignia so that Putin could, with a smirk, deny any involvement. But what these irregulars did do was stir up enough trouble to allow Putin to be able to say that he was moving regular troops in to “restore order” and protect the ethnic Russian population of the affected areas.

None of this is new. In the 1860s and early 1870s, the Fenians, disaffected Irish immigrants to the US who sought to attack Canada in order to pressure the British to give up Ireland, staged cross-border raids into Canada. In 1866, one such raid numbered over 1,000 fighters. These raids posed a real danger to Canadians living along the border. Though the US Government did not officially support the Fenians, a certain amount of looking the other way on the part of local officials helped these raids to go forward. The Fenian raids exposed the weakness of Canada’s defences and also encouraged talk of a Confederation between the British territories of what became Canada.¹²³

¹²² Malone, K.G., “Trump cabinet member weighs in on Alberta separatism,” *CBC News*, 23 January, 2026, at: <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/calgary/trump-cabinet-member-weighs-in-on-alberta-separatism-9.7058082>

¹²³ Grodzinsky, J., Vronsky, P. and McIntosh, A., “Fenian Raids,” *The Canadian Encyclopedia*, March 11, 2021, at: <https://thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/fenian-raids>

So, Canada might perhaps face, as it was dealing with a steadily worsening economic and public order crisis, pin-prick attacks designed to throw Canadians further off-balance and make the point that much worse lies in store if they don't smarten up. These could be undertaken by regular US troops in mufti, but also by that growing army of violent MAGA extremists who attacked Congress on January 6, and whom Trump pardoned to serve as his own private army. Using them would allow Trump to deny official involvement, though it would, of course, be a stretch to everyone, except perhaps Trump himself.

Much would depend on how Canada responded to this. Certainly, there is a need for our military and other security forces to be ready to forcefully engage these thugs, and not as a "law enforcement" operation, but rather as a response to armed groups that are threatening our national survival. Trump will rely on a natural reluctance on our part to do this, for fear that it would "escalate" the situation. This is what happened in Ukraine in 2014. Ukrainians held off responding forcefully to the little green men for fear that doing so would provoke Russia to do even worse. But, of course, Putin fully intended to do worse all along; he was testing the waters to see how far he could go.

So, it would be a mistake not to respond if Trump tried his own version of this tactic. This has to be met forcefully and quickly or Trump will be able to sell the idea that Canadians aren't really serious about defending their country. The lesson of Ukraine is clear. If we get to the point that Trump is prepared to send small units across the border, even irregular ones, our doing nothing and hoping that he will somehow be impressed by our restraint is a fool's errand. All that restraint will get us is further escalation from him. If a group of latter-day "MAGA-Fenians" were to come across the border, they must be met forcefully.

Some thought should be given in Canada to where these pin prick attacks may be likely and how we can best prepare to make the point that we are totally serious in meeting them. A critical aspect of this "skirmishing" phase would be American public opinion. Polling consistently shows that Americans, of all political backgrounds, are strongly opposed to any takeover of Canada against the will of the Canadian people. Though Quislings may be willing to argue that what is going on is something Canadians really want, we must show the American people that this is *not* what we want. The resulting lack of public support in America might prevent Trump from getting much beyond this skirmishing.

As an aside, the gratuitous anti-American actions in evidence in Canada today, like booing their national anthem at hockey games, may be satisfying for Canadians and understandable under the circumstances, but we should give some thought to whether it's really such a good idea. Since the various branches of the actual US government are apparently utterly incapable of doing their jobs and containing Trump, the great American public is probably going to be our greatest ally in terms of restraining him if any of this ever happens. We are certainly well within our rights to make it known that we detest what Trump's *government* is doing, but insulting *Americans* may not be so smart; we may need them.

Assuming we fail to get the message, and if Trump believes he has the political backing to keep going, things could get warmer. Again, an all-out war is doubtful, but more forceful incursions by units of the US military, and an escalation of other types of attacks (cyber, etc.) designed to sow panic and confusion are likely. If it comes to a matter of Canadian military units having to fight their American counterparts in conventional battles, we won't last long. Indeed, the fighting could begin with a sharp attack designed to obliterate Canada's limited military bases and infrastructure. So, the issue becomes putting up a conventional fight as long as we can, to make the point that we don't accept this, but then being ready to fade away for what will be a campaign to make their occupation as difficult as possible.

Much of this can be quietly prepared in advance, and the Defence Department's call for a reserve force of 100,000 and a supplementary reserve of 300,000 is interesting when seen in this light.

Of course, these capabilities won't be ready before Trump has left office, but some elements of a decentralized but still organised resistance can be prepared and dispersed across the country in a matter of a few months. This can include the military reserves we do have, retired military people who have had training, and groups like the RCMP and other police forces who have weapons training and know the communities they reside in intimately. Weapons, explosives, IEDs, drones and other supplies can be disbursed across the country and secured.

The Ukrainians have shown what can be done by determined resistance, making use of new technologies which are now readily available, particularly drones. Since the Americans will likely try to silence the Federal government in Ottawa as a first order of business, we must

prepare for the elements of this resistance to operate largely independently across the country until central authority can be restored.

The key in all this will not be to defeat the Americans, but to force them to make their occupation of Canada just that—an occupation. The lie that Canadians have accepted this invasion cannot be allowed to take hold; Americans, and the world, must see that Canadians do not accept this and are fighting back. The trick of finding pliable Canadians to govern on Trump’s behalf, as the Americans are trying to do in Venezuela, will be tried, but whoever they install in power must be resisted.

Thus, if we cannot defeat the Americans, we can make their occupation costly. We should also not be without an ability to send small units across the border to mount guerilla style attacks against critical American infrastructure and also to mount cyber attacks of our own. The basic point is that their deepest hope will be that they can digest Canada without much resistance. Canada’s strategy must therefore lie in making ourselves as “indigestible” as we possibly can until the American public insists that this attempt to take over Canada be stopped. This will test Canadians, as casualties will go both ways. We must be prepared for that. It is important to inculcate in the Canadian population a higher degree of personal and societal resilience in the face of these threats.¹²⁴

And, of course, while all of this is going on, the wider world will be going crazy. The Danish PM’s remark that an attack on Greenland would be the end of NATO could be multiplied dozens of times in the case of an actual American attack on Canada. An America which had gone so utterly rogue as to actually invade Canada would be something the international order could not live with. The global economy would be further upended, for a start.

This is a potential source of weakness for the US, whose national debt is now flirting with catastrophe. Any concerted international move to dump US Treasuries and other bonds would seriously affect the US economy. It was the EU signaling that it would finally avail itself of all of the financial tools at its disposal if Trump actually moved on Greenland (the

¹²⁴ Anderssen, E., “A US invasion of Canada is far-fetched. Canadians are preparing anyway,” *Globe and Mail*, 18 March, 2026, at; <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/canada/article-how-canadians-can-unite-in-their-own-defence/>

so-called trade “bazooka”) which may have caused him to back off.¹²⁵ It seems unlikely that an American invasion of Canada would not cause a serious economic crisis for the US. Even if it could not come to our aid militarily, the world would punish America for this. Canada should, even now, be quietly working with international partners to develop a devastating economic response should an American invasion take place.

We should not, of course, overlook the possibility of a more limited US invasion of Canada. What might happen, for example, if, following on from the line that it’s all about Arctic security, the Americans were to invade a part of Canada’s Arctic and declare it to henceforth be under the permanent “protection” of the US? They would presumably then go about the task of establishing a base there. This scenario would be difficult to respond to, though less personally dangerous for the majority of Canadians living in the southern part of the country. It would amount to them taking part of our country and then daring us to try to kick them out.

What would we do? How would we do it? At the very least, we need to think hard about how we would respond to this and what capabilities we could bring to bear. Presumably, diplomacy aimed at the American public and international opinion would be a major part of the response. But military options designed to avoid a large-scale direct confrontation, but make their stay on our territory much harder than they anticipate, could also be looked at. Survival in the Arctic is hard; if supplies could be interrupted it can be made much harder. And we should be working now to encourage the wider world to view even a limited take-over of Canadian territory as a line that requires a serious economic response – “If Trump can take over a part of Canada and get away with it, is anyone safe?”

I don’t believe that any of this is likely. Several times, I have been shaking my head as I wrote this piece. But the fact that we live in a world where we have to actually think about it, however fleetingly, shows us where we are today. Even if Trump won’t actually invade us, the challenge he has posed to our national survival is real.

Complete separation from the US is not possible, and some level of cooperation in areas such as the aerospace defence of the continent will go on, at least for a time. And America will always be a significant economic partner. But we must diversify our economy and defence

¹²⁵ Monti, M and Goulard, S., “This is what the EU’s trade bazooka was meant for,” *POLITICO*, 21 January, 2026, at: <https://www.politico.eu/article/this-is-what-eu-trade-bazooka-was-meant-for/>

relations away from them to the maximum extent possible. That will take time and not be easy, but what choice do we have?