

# Canadian and US imperialism “modernizing” NORAD for global war

E.P. Milligan  
14 May 2024

Canada’s trade union-backed Liberal government issued a “defence policy update” last month that pledged tens of billions of dollars in increased military spending and outlined plans to ensure that the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) has the means to wage war anywhere in the world. Central to the policy update is the “modernization” of NORAD—the joint Canada-US aerospace and maritime defence command established at the height of the Cold War—and the further militarization of the Arctic.

NORAD is viewed by both Washington and Ottawa as central to waging “strategic conflict” and all-out war, including nuclear war, against its great-power rivals, above all Russia and China, in what amounts to a redivision of the world.

Since its founding in 1958, NORAD has been a cornerstone of the now eight-decade-old military-strategic alliance between US and Canadian imperialism. Underscoring its importance, US President Joe Biden proclaimed during a visit to Ottawa last year: “NORAD is the only binational military command in the world, yet another way in which our partnership is exceptional.”

“Canada,” the Liberal government defence policy update declares, “is committed to defending North America against aerospace threats in partnership with the United States.” But it quickly makes clear that NORAD’s defence mission is inseparable from, and the foundation, for the aggressive pursuit of Canadian and American imperialist interests the world over.

“To complement and build on investments already made under our NORAD modernization plan, we will further explore Canada’s integrated air and missile defence capabilities,” states the update. “This more robust approach to integrated air and missile defence will have significant benefits **across all theatres in which Canada operates and strengthen our contribution to collective security.**” (emphasis added)

If this were not a clear enough statement of NORAD’s role in asserting North American imperialist hegemony across the globe, the update further declares, “When we are strong and secure at home, we can support our allies without fear of retaliation.”

## Tens of billions for imperialist war

The Trudeau government formally committed to NORAD “modernization” in a joint Canada-US statement signed, so as to avoid press coverage and public debate, in August 2021, the day before parliament was dissolved and the campaign for the Sept. 20, 2021 election launched.

Ten months later, in June 2022, the Trudeau government pledged Can. \$39 billion over the next 20 years to upgrade and expand NORAD’s reach and capabilities. As an initial down payment, it allotted \$4.9 billion to be spent over the next six years to modernize NORAD, including its “early

warning” surveillance capabilities and infrastructure in the far north.

Military analysts have warned that the real cost of NORAD modernization will likely be much higher than the announced \$39 billion due to technological improvements and changing parameters.

A key feature of Canada’s NORAD modernization program is the purchase of 88 F-35 “stealth” fighter jets from the US. Washington and Ottawa will also introduce an “Over-the-Horizon” radar system designed for the early detection of ballistic missile prelaunch activity, and develop new radar and sensor systems under the “Crossbow” program aimed at detecting and destroying ballistic missile launch sites thousands of kilometres away.

There is nothing “defensive” about the NORAD modernization project. The imperialists’ goals are aggressive and predatory: creating the infrastructure for US and Canadian imperialism to be able to wage a “winnable” nuclear conflict with Russia and China, and secure geostrategic hegemony in the Arctic.

US imperialism has long been pressing the Trudeau Liberal government to “do more” in this regard. In April of last year, the *Washington Post* published a leaked document bearing the seal of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff which characterized the Canadian military as inadequately prepared and complained that “significant Arctic capabilities and modernization plans have not materialized.”

These tensions burst into the open last year, when US Senator Dan Sullivan (R-Alaska) grilled Lieutenant-General Gregory Guillot during the latter’s confirmation hearing as NORAD Commander. After chastising the Canadian government for failing “to pull their weight,” Sullivan asked, “Can you commit to us to have those tough conversations ... with your Canadian counterparts.”

“Yes, senator,” replied Guillot, “you can count on me to do that.” The new NORAD commander has since publicly pressed for US troops to conduct more joint training exercises in the Canadian Arctic.

Behind these tensions lie definite conflicts between North America’s two imperialist powers. Canadian imperialism views its military-strategic partnership with Washington as critical to advancing its interests around the world. Moreover, under conditions where there has been an enormous erosion in America’s world position, above all its economic predominance, Canada’s ruling elite has cleaved still more to its US ally. However, Canada’s ruling class has long resisted any attempt to encroach on its territorial claims and geostrategic interests in the Arctic. The most well-known example of disputes in this region with its US ally is Canada’s claim that the Northwest Passage is part of its territorial waters. Washington considers this increasingly important trade route to be international waters.

The competition between the great powers in the Arctic is being exacerbated by the impact of climate change. A dramatic militarization of the region is well underway as the states with Arctic borders or economic interests seek to take advantage of the region’s rich resources and strategic trade routes. The Arctic can therefore quickly emerge as a new

northern front in the rapidly escalating third world war, which began with US imperialism's incitement—with the full support of the Canadian ruling class—of war with Russia over Ukraine. It has since expanded to the Middle East with the imperialist powers' unconditional backing of Israel's genocidal onslaught on the Palestinians; and it is inextricably bound up, as even Biden and US Secretary of State Antony Blinken have forthrightly stated, with the ever-intensifying economic, diplomatic and military pressure that Washington and its allies are placing on China.

Canadian imperialism has historically been reluctant to formalize a NATO presence in the Arctic, preferring to jointly manage what the defence policy update calls NATO's "western" flank with the US under NORAD. But under conditions of NATO and Canada's ongoing war against Russia, and the highly provocative entry of Sweden and Finland into the "Western alliance," Ottawa has changed course. It now welcomes greater NATO involvement, a shift that was underscored by a joint 2022 visit by Trudeau and NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg to NORAD facilities in Cold Lake, Alberta and at Cambridge Bay, Nunavut.

Former Defence Minister Anita Anand declared in a 2022 speech that the "chaotic" state of the world means that Canada must take a more "bold and aggressive" approach to defending its interests. "We do live in a world at the present time that appears to be growing darker," she remarked. "In this new world, Canada's geographic position no longer provides the same protection that it once did. And in this new world, the security environment facing Canada is less secure, less predictable and more chaotic." Canada's Chief of Defence Staff General Wayne Eyre has echoed these remarks, adding the question of "civil defence"—i.e., the militarization of Canadian society itself. "Part of [defence] is the ability to intercept," he stated. "The other piece is denial by resilience—national resilience—so we're going to have to explore that more as part of our policy update."

There is unanimous support within Canada's political establishment for NORAD modernization and the defence policy update's assertion that the Canadian military must have the means to wage war around the world, from the Russian Arctic to the South China Sea, in space and cyberspace. However, the Conservative official opposition, the trade union-sponsored NDP, the corporate media, and the military-security establishment have all criticised the government for not procuring new weapons and weapons systems more quickly and in even greater numbers. As for the pro-Quebec independence Bloc Québécois, its only concern is that Quebec must get its "juste part" (fair share) of the tens of billions to be squandered on waging and preparing for war.

### **The militarization of the Arctic and the imperialist redivision of the world**

The militarization of the Arctic is but one component of a global resurgence of competition and outright conflict between the great powers over markets, spheres of influence, and raw materials. It finds its sharpest expression in the US-led war against Russia in Ukraine, which is aimed at subordinating Russia to the status of a semi-colony so that the Western powers can seize its vast natural resources, and in the imperialist powers' advanced preparations for war with China.

The Arctic plays an increasingly important role in the imperialist powers' redivision of the world for several reasons. First, it is a region rich in key raw materials, including oil and gas, and rare earths that are crucial for the rapidly expanding "clean energy" economy. Territorial claims are decisive in determining which power can lay claim to these natural resources. Secondly, the Northwest Passage on Canada's northern coast and the Northern Sea Route along Russia's Arctic coast are quickly

becoming viable trade routes that would massively reduce freight transport times and costs between Europe and Asia. Thirdly, control over the Arctic and its approaches would offer crucial military advantages during a third world war. Missiles fired by North America's imperialist powers against Russia and China could swiftly reach their targets by traversing the Arctic.

The 2022 US National Defense Strategy—which is soon to be supplemented by a new Pentagon "Arctic Strategy"—explained how US imperialism intends to pursue its interests in the region: "Climate change is creating new corridors of strategic interaction, particularly in the Arctic region. It will increase demands, including on the Joint Force, for disaster response and defense support of civil authorities, and affect security relationships with some Allies and partners. Insecurity and instability related to climate change may tax governance capacity in some countries while heightening tensions between others, risking new armed conflicts and increasing demands for stabilization activities."

The report declared that Washington favours "a stable Arctic region characterized by adherence to internationally agreed upon rules and norms. The Department will deter threats to the US homeland from and through the Arctic region by improving early warning and ISR (Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance) capabilities, partnering with Canada to enhance North American Aerospace Defense Command capabilities, and working with Allies and partners to increase shared maritime domain awareness."

The Institute for Peace and Diplomacy, a euphemistically named think tank of the Canadian ruling class, published a report last year titled, "The Arctic: A Primary Canadian National Interest." The report began by noting comments made in 2022 by Vince Rigby, a former national security and intelligence adviser to Trudeau. Speaking at the University of Ottawa Task Force on National Security, Rigby declared that "a serious review by Canada of its presence in the Arctic" is needed, "including its military footprint and capabilities, which have received scant attention over the decades despite considerable government rhetoric to the contrary."

The report argued NORAD modernization was of critical importance to achieving the aims of Canadian imperialism in the Arctic and beyond: "If Canadian-American relations are Canada's number one priority, then the place to start is to ensure that we use our vast Arctic territory to enhance American military security by jointly managing and contributing to the common defence through NORAD. Upgrading the North Warning System is an indication that common sense has at last prevailed in Ottawa. There is a troubling precedent, however, if Ottawa had continued to dither . . . Being a laggard in northern defence could adversely affect Canadian independence and our standing with the United States and other allies, but if the opposite were true—if Canada was a leader in Arctic capabilities—it would benefit greatly our relations with the United States."

The report pointed to the end of the "unipolar world," i.e., the unchallenged world hegemony of US imperialism. It argued that Canada should respond to this development by re-asserting itself as a "middle power" in order to prevent becoming a "marginal state."

The report argued in particular that beefing up Canada's military presence in the Arctic would solidify Canada as a "pivot state" against China: "Strategic minerals, like lithium and cobalt, are the key components to drive the low carbon and digital economy and the competition for strategic minerals is fierce. China, which describes itself as a 'near-Arctic power' is currently the dominant player across critical minerals supply chains. In December 2022, Canada launched its Critical Minerals Strategy and half of the 31 minerals listed are to be found in the Northwest Territories. Indeed, the indigenous-led Nechalacho rare earths project is the first rare earths mine in Canada and only the second in North America. ... If Canada can become a major supplier of critical minerals, it will both produce great wealth ... and establish itself as an important hub

or pivot state in the strategic competition with China.”

The report goes on to describe the “potential wealth” offshore. Citing the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), the report notes that coastal states receive a “12 nautical mile territorial sea with full sovereignty rights, and a 200 nautical mile continental shelf exclusive economic zone.” While the surface waters in such an economic zone are considered international waters, all rights to anything below the surface—from fish to oil, natural gas and minerals—are the exclusive preserve of the coastal state.

UNCLOS provides an additional stipulation for assessing further claims in the event that the continental shelf extends beyond 200 nautical miles. Because the true extent of the North American and Eurasian continental shelves in the Arctic are relatively poorly understood, there has been a race between the Arctic states to conduct underwater geological surveys to produce data favourable to claiming as much of the Arctic Ocean as possible. This has led to a border dispute between Russia and Canada, who have submitted conflicting claims. The US is not a signatory to UNCLOS, though it has cynically used its provisions to bully China and incite its neighbours in the South China Sea.

To secure Canadian imperialism’s Arctic interests, the report proposes that Ottawa should further integrate its Arctic military operations with NATO. “It might be time again for Canada to have a formal mission in support of NATO’s now greatly expanded northern flank,” the report noted, referring to Finland and Sweden becoming alliance members following the US-provoked Russian invasion of Ukraine. “Defending North America, not just Europe, is part and parcel of defending NATO—there are two geographic components to the transatlantic alliance.”

In order to achieve its predatory aims, Canadian imperialism aims to enlist the support of the Far North’s tiny indigenous elite. With utter cynicism, the report states, “The Arctic provides scope for the Canadian commitments to environmental sustainability and reconciliation with indigenous peoples. Like Brazil with the rainforest, Canada is in possession of a wide expanse of the Arctic ... ‘stewardship’ must be an essential component of Canada’s Arctic Strategy. This is best done in collaboration with the Inuit and other aboriginal peoples who have lived in this harsh climate for many millennia.”

The militarization drive in the Arctic will most certainly involve the continuation of the brutal oppression of the indigenous population—the violation of land rights, the ramping up of the exploitation of indigenous workers, widespread environmental pollution, not to mention placing the entire population in the line of fire. The “collaboration” to which the report refers means the use of the tiny Indigenous elite promoted through the cynical use of identity politics as a battering ram against the general population, the vast majority of which will oppose the war drive in the region.

The only force within society capable of halting a global conflagration—which now poses an existential threat to the survival of humanity itself—is the international working class united around a genuine socialist program. The struggle against NORAD modernization and the militarization of the Arctic must be combined with opposition to imperialist war around the world, from the US-led war to subjugate Russia to the ongoing horrific imperialist-backed genocide in Gaza. This requires the building of an international anti-war movement led by the working class to fight imperialist aggression and all forms of oppression.



To contact the WSWs and the  
Socialist Equality Party visit:

**[wsws.org/contact](https://www.wsws.org/contact)**