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True North in Canadian public policy

Commentary

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NORAD, Continental Defence, and the Pilot Retention Crisis Facing Canada's Air Force

Richard Shimooka

And by the way, Canada, they like to talk. They're our great neighbor. They fought World War Two with us, and we appreciate it; they fought World War One with us and we appreciate it. We're protecting each other . . . So hopefully we'll be able to work it out with Canada, we have very good relationships with Canada, we have for a long time . . . but Canada's not going to take advantage of the US any longer.

President Donald J. Trump, June 18, 2018

Introduction

The Canada-US relationship has been front and centre in public view over the past year, with trade disputes and contentious renegotiations around NAFTA, which has since been renamed the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement. As the US president suggests, the bilateral security relationship is seen as a source of strength and has largely escaped scrutiny. Its cornerstone is the North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD), which celebrated its 60th anniversary this year. However, its future health may be in doubt due to factors unrelated to trade. Rather, serious challenges facing the Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF) in personnel management, procurement, and capabilities may threaten the relationship in the future.

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The Canada-US Alliance and NORAD

In the years after the Second World War, Canada made continental air defence a national priority, which included the development of an indigenous interceptor aircraft. In order to better coordinate their air defences, Canada and the US agreed to establish NORAD as a bi-national command (Agreement Between the Government of Canada and the Government of the United States of America on the North American Aerospace Defense Command 2006). It would have an American commander and a Canadian deputy commander in an integrated command structure, which included shared aircraft and ground surveillance assets.

NORAD's importance waned soon after its creation (Behar 2018). First the nature of the threat changed from long-range bombers that could be intercepted by tactical fighters, to effectively invulnerable intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs). Furthermore in the late 1950s and 1960s, successive Canadian governments' priorities shifted away from defence, largely towards new entitlement and infrastructure programs. From this point on, Canada would adopt what Joel Sokolsky and Christian Leuprecht (2015) describe as a Walmart "grand strategy":

> In retail-shopping terms, Canada has no need for an upscale Saks Fifth Avenue level of grand strategy when it has fared well with Walmart. Dollar stores peddle cheap off-label knockoffs, Costco has people buying in bulk, but Walmart shoppers are looking for deals on name brands. Specifically, the department store analogy is meant to capture Canadian politicians' (albeit not the generals') overall approach to defense expenditures: a predilection for window shopping, deferred procurements, shopping for defense goods without breaking the bank, yet enough practical utility and superficial style to keep the country secure, prosperous, and stable. (543)

In particular, Canada only spent ''just enough'' to play in the international clubs, a strategy the government pursued until the late 1970s. At that time, Canada's ability to defer modernization, particularly in regards to tactical fighter aircraft, reached its limits. The government then launched a three-year competition process, which ended with the F/A-18A Hornet's selection in April of 1980. The CF-18, as it was designated, was less ideal for northern operations than the larger and more capable F-14 or F-15s. However, this was not quite apparent during the 1980s, as Europe remained the primary focus for RCAF operations.

Continental Security and the Emerging Threat Environment

The end of the Cold War brought renewed Canadian interest in continental security. Already the US and Canadian governments were in the process of upgrading the northern warning system of radars. Canada then invested in new infrastructure for air operations, such as hangars and runways at five forward operating locations within the Arctic Circle (Department of National Defence and the Canadian Forces 1994). In addition, NORAD's relevance increased significantly after September 11, with a focus on internal threats, like that posed by hijacked airliners.

However, Russia's resumption of long-range bomber patrols in North American airspace in 2007 has rehabilitated its role against external threats. Since then, the frequency and technical ability displayed during these flights have increased, with multiple aerial refuellings and even long-range fighter escorts. Furthermore, Vladimir Putin's Russia has fielded, or is planning to field, a range of new capabilities that increase the risks to North America. Several of these advances were demonstrated during operations in Syria, like the Kh-101 air-launched cruise missile launched from Russian bombers. Notably, these missiles have a claimed range of nearly 2500 nm (Egozi 2015). While Russia is seemingly in the vanguard of these developments, other countries have made similar advancements in capability.

The interlocking surveillance system of signals intelligence (Maloney 2004), satellite reconnaissance (Behar 2018) and airborne and ground-based radars are well adapted for traditional threats like ICBMs or long-range penetrating bombers. However, it is less effective against many of these new developments, such as low-flying cruise missiles, particularly around the periphery and interior of the lower 48 states and segments of the far north (Charron and Ferguson 2017).

As a result, the utility of tactical fighters has increased in light of these emerging threats. Only tactical fighters provide the flexibility that can address these shortcomings, plugging critical gaps when required. Furthermore, Canada's contribution to NORAD provides increased flexibility for US force planners. In times of heightened readiness, Canadian fighters can shoulder a greater NORAD role, which frees up continental US Air Force (USAF) squadrons for foreign deployment. However, this is only the case if the RCAF can provide an effective contribution to collective continental defence. As we will see, this is now in doubt.

> "Russia has fielded, or is planning to field, a range of new capabilities that increase the risks to North America."

The RCAF Personnel Crisis

Despite the growing challenges facing NORAD, the RCAF's tactical fighter capabilities are diminishing, and can only provide limited value for existing threats both in the short- and long-term. This can be attributed to two broad issues.

The most immediate problem is the retention of experienced pilots and support staff. This is a common problem among western states and variously attributed to a competitive civil sector, high operational tempo since 2001, suboptimal retention policies, and underfunding of operational accounts leading to a lack of flying hours (DeCarlo 2015). Prior to 2015, retention problems were serious, but manageable, as was the case for US military aviation arms. However, now these issues are apparent across the RCAF: over 63 percent of operational squadrons are understrength, with the RCAF pilot capability about 16 percent below strength and the fighter force at least 20 percent short (1st Canadian Division 2016).

Unfortunately, the RCAF's fighter personnel problems are much more acute than other areas, both in their intractability and scale. To start, it is important to note that the size of the Canadian tactical fighter fleet is very sensitive to changes. There are less than 100 active CF-18 pilots in the service (a proportion of whom are assigned to non-flying positions), with an annual production of only 14–18 pilots per year (Government of Canada 2017c).

While precise attrition numbers are unavailable for fighter fleet, considering the RCAF's overall pilot retention challenges and comments by informed individuals concerning this particular area (Canadian Press 2016), the situation is very serious. It can be attributed in part to the controversy surrounding the fighter replacement program, particularly after the Liberal Party's 2015 election victory.

The new Liberal government's decision to restart the entire process exacerbated the already precarious retention situation, tipping the balance against pilots staying. It also roughly coincided with the appearance of F-35s at multinational Flag exercises (Richards 2018) as well as a greater awareness of emerging threats after Canadian fighter operations in the Middle East and Eastern Europe. The consequences of the situation are well

illustrated in a 2008 quote from then-Chief of the Air Staff Angus Watt: "There is nothing pilots like to see more than a new aircraft sitting on the ramp. Although it is a new capability, it is also a key retention tool for me" (Canada, Senate, *Proceedings of the Standing Senate Committee on National Security and Defence* 2008).

Conversely, the prospect of flying the 35-year-old CF-18 another 15 years in the face of threats that are advancing technologically and growing significantly more dangerous has had precisely the opposite effect, with large numbers of experienced pilots leaving the RCAF. Many either take advantage of generous hiring bonuses within the civilian airlines, or opt to stay in more familiar environments with allied air forces. One particular destination is the Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF), which is transitioning to the F-35 (Air Force (Australia)).

> "The most immediate problem is the retention of experienced pilots and support staff."

The root of this situation is related to the second major cause: a horribly botched procurement process for a CF-18 replacement by two successive governments. Canada was an early member of the Joint Strike Fighter program, and, in 2010, the Conservative government decided to purchase the aircraft. Quickly, the decision came under fire from opposition parties and oversight bodies, leading the government to launch an independent reassessment. It returned in the spring of 2014 with a recommendation of the exact same decision (Shimooka 2016). The Conservatives attempted to follow through and arranged an initial purchase of four USAF F-35s. The decision was scrapped in September of 2014 after a US briefing document that detailed the arrangement was leaked (Koring 2014).

The present troubles can be wholly attributed to the Liberal Party of Canada however. During the 2015 election campaign, the Liberals made a promise to not purchase the F-35, and go with a "less costly" alternative, and gave the example of the F/A-18E/F Super Hornet (Liberal Party 2015). Upon entering government, they set about implementing the decision. This was apparently done with the heavy influence of Boeing lobbying (Office of the Commissioner of Lobbying of Canada 2018) and minimal input from military authorities (Berthiaume 2016c). Their response was separated into two parts: an interim purchase of 18 Super Hornets, followed by a competition for a permanent replacement fleet of 88 aircraft.

The justification for this course of action was a so-called capability gap, which the Liberal government said they were not willing to "risk manage" any further, even though this nature of capability management had been the norm for decades (Government of Canada 2016). They argued that only the Super Hornet could meet this urgent requirement, due to its interoperability and similarity to the existing CF-18 fleet.

However, this was merely a convenient pretext to justify a sole source purchase, and was clearly politically motivated. Several commentators at the time pointed out the shortcomings of this decision (Berthiaume 2016a). The criticism included wasting billions of dollars for a minimal increase in combat capability, and even that could be questioned given the lack of pilots in the RCAF (Berthiaume 2016b). There was also the suggestion that it would all but ensure that the Super Hornet would win a subsequent competition. Considering how the government had conjured up a capability gap that they said only the F/A-18E/F could meet, and how the concept went against every previous analysis undertaken by the bureaucracy and the subject matter experts therein, it was clear that the interim fighter procurement had far more to do with politics than Canada's ability to contribute meaningfully to the defence of North America.

Nevertheless, the government pushed ahead with its decision and sent a formal Letter of Request to the US government (Government of Canada 2017a). Not even a year later, the interim buy was dead. In the fall of 2017, a trade dispute between Bombardier and Boeing over civil airliners spilled over into the interim buy process. However, this seemed to be a convenient pretext for the actual reason for the cancellation. In late September, the US Defence Security Cooperation Agency reported that the total cost of acquiring the Super Hornet was US$5.23 billion (Defense Security Cooperation Agency 2017). This was wildly beyond the Liberal Party expectations, approaching the US$7 billion dollar price tag for purchasing 65 F-35As (Shimooka and McDonough 2017). The government had been given advanced warning of this, and embarked on plan B.

In February 2017, a dozen retired Air Force commanders penned a letter suggesting that Canada examine the purchase of retiring Australian F/A-18As to fill the capability gap as an alternative for the interim buy (Ashley et al.). As the political will for the Super Hornet dissipated, the government followed through on the former commanders' suggestion. By August, the Department of National Defence had commenced discussion with Australia on a potential sale of their retiring Hornets (Government of Canada 2017d). The plan was officially announced on December 12, 2017, with government representatives keen to highlight their commitment to a full replacement process (CPAC 2017).

> "Adding the RAAF Hornets will cause significant additional work, requiring far more resources to make them suitable for service."

Although the purchase of used Australian aircraft avoids the particularly pernicious consequences of the procurement of new Super Hornets, there will be serious ones nonetheless. The RCAF will struggle to meet its current demands for fighter aircraft, to speak nothing of resolving the so-called capability gap. As the 1st Canadian Air Division business plan suggests, the fleet is already suffering from increasing maintenance requirements due to the age of the CF-18 fleet, which increases the burden on the support system, particularly personnel. Adding the RAAF Hornets will cause significant additional work, requiring far more resources to make them suitable for service.

While Canadian officials have taken great pains to point out that they are very familiar with these airframes (Government of Canada 2017b), given their similarity to the CF-18 (which is true), they will still require significant upgrades to bring them up to RCAF safety and operational standards (Graney 2018). Buying the RAAF airframes simply to use for parts may be the only way that Canada could reasonably benefit from the procurement; in any case, the facts cast significant doubt on the motivation and rationale for the interim buy of someone else's worn-out and technologically obsolete aircraft.

Furthermore, the acquisition of used RAAF aircraft will not address pilots' concerns surrounding the aging fighter fleet and functional obsolescence; rather, it has made the situation all the worse. According to the government timeline, very few if any current CF-18 pilots will see the future fighter, and will be forced to fly the Hornet for the rest of their military flying career (Pugliese 2018). Given their understanding of the future threat environment and the technological progress being made by Canada's close allies, this will only exacerbate the already significant retention problem.

Consequences

The consequences are significant for the USAF and Canada, for continental defence, and international security. In its current state, the RCAF is struggling to maintain its ability to support its core NORAD and NATO missions. However, it is unlikely that this is sustainable in the long-term. Current policies on pilot and support staff retention will at best only maintain the current staffing levels. However, it is much more probable that further erosion will occur. This stands in stark contrast to the Government of Canada's stated policy objective of being able to meet the capability gap. The Liberal Government's fighter aircraft replacement program will require seven years to see the first delivery of the replacement jets with the last CF-18 to be retired in 2032. This means that the RCAF will soldier on with an already technologically obsolete fighter aircraft for another 14 years.

In view of its diminishing interoperability and operational relevance, US force planners must now weigh the value of the CF-18 when considering future operations. They will no longer be able to rely on Canada's fighter force to cover a potential capability gap, as occurred during the 2007 grounding of F-15s after a structural failure (Canadian Press 2007). Indeed, the CF-18 fleet will be unable to deal with potential new threats like those posed by new Russian missile systems.

> "US force planners must now weigh the value of the CF-18 when considering future operations."

Moreover, Canada's aging airframes will be far less valuable in a foreign expeditionary role in all but the most benign security environments given their obsolescence. Consequently it will fall to US forces to find the resources to mitigate the deficiencies this creates for continental and coalition operations. In this way, Canada's abysmal military procurement record, and the subsequent impact on retention, may become another burden on an already strained relationship.

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About the Author

Richard Shimooka is a Senior Fellow at the Macdonald-Laurier Institute. He was a Senior Fellow at the Defence Management Studies Programme at Queen's University from 2007–2012, and a Research Fellow at the Conference of Defence Associations Institute from 2012-2017. Richard works' cover a diverse array of topics, including Canadian and American foreign and defence policy, modern airpower and defence procurement.

He is a frequent commentator in the media on security and defence issues and has published articles in the *National Post*, *Ottawa Citizen*, *The Hill Times*, *War on the Rocks*, *On Track*, *Canadian Military Journal*, as well as a book, *Let Sleeping Dogs Lie: The Influence of External Studies and Reports on National Defence Policy* (Queens' School of Policy Studies) with Douglas Bland and Vimy Paper 33: *The Fourth Dimension: The F-35 Program, Defence Procurement, and the Conservative Government, 2006- 2015* (CDA Institute). He has a forthcoming work with UBC Press titled, *No Nobler Purpose: Canada, The United States and 1996 Rwandan Refugee Crisis*. Richard holds a Masters in Strategic Studies from the University of Wales Aberystwyth and a Bachelors with Honours in Political Studies from Queen's University.

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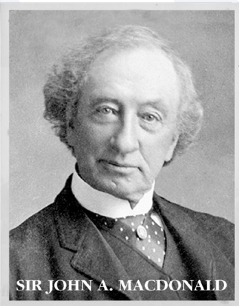
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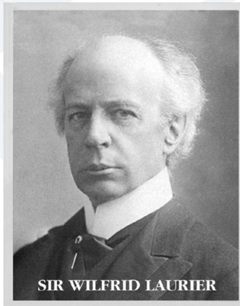
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CONTACT US: Macdonald-Laurier Institute
323 Chapel Street, Suite #300
Ottawa, Ontario, Canada
K1N 7Z2

TELEPHONE: (613) 482-8327

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