



**CANADIAN GLOBAL AFFAIRS INSTITUTE
INSTITUT CANADIEN DES AFFAIRES MONDIALES**

U.S. Perspective of Continental Defence

by Francis Finlayson
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CONFERENCE REPORT

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Prepared for the Canadian Global Affairs Institute
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Brigadier General Peter M. Fesler - Deputy Director of Operations, North American Aerospace Defense Command Headquarters (NORAD).

Iris Ferguson - Senior Advisor, U.S. Air Force and Council on Foreign Relations Canadian International Fellow.

Lindsay Rodman - Executive Director, Leadership Council of Women in National Security (LCWINS).

QUESTION: *How do you see the American military adapting and modernizing its plans for homeland defence?*

Lindsay Rodman

- The United States is currently in “wait-and-see” mode, but the Biden agenda, such as in the National Security Strategic Guidance initiative, signals that homeland defence is not “priority number one.”
- The Department of Defense (DOD) believes continental defence is an increasingly important area, as outlined in the 2018 National Defense Strategy (NDS). The NDS states that North America is “no longer a sanctuary.”
- Long range bombers and ballistic missiles remain the primary priorities of the United States pertaining to continental defence, but emerging threats such as cyberattacks on critical infrastructure, the weaponization of space, and domestic extremism are quickly becoming prominent national security considerations.
- Great power competition is a main focus of the Biden administration as far as we can tell and given the intertwining of these emerging threats with great power competition, it may become quite relevant to Canadian scholars who have already analyzed these issues.

QUESTION: *Can you describe what efforts are underway to modernize NORAD/NORTHCOM in a continental framework and how it impacts homeland security specifically?*

BGen Peter Fesler

- President Biden and Prime Minister Trudeau discussed NORAD modernization at their first bilateral meeting, so the Biden administration is thinking about it.
- The focus on great power competition itself shows a concern over homeland security, as many of emerging threats, such as cyberattacks, threaten North America directly. It indicates that competitors are thinking of conflict in a global sense.



- NORAD modernization does not mean changes to its initial mission or core objectives. It is also not simply the replacement of the North Warning System. It is changes to concepts and how we understand global threats.
- A new focus on deterrence and neutralizing global threats before they harm North America is key to preventing conflict, and central to modernizing NORAD.
- Increasing *domain awareness*, such as expanding our knowledge of the Arctic and of undersea threats, is crucial to establishing *decision superiority*, which allows the United States and Canada to make quick and effective decisions relating to threat deterrence.
- NORAD modernization must be in harmony with DOD and Canadian Joint Operations Command (CJOC) strategies.

QUESTION: *Can you give us a sense of how the defence of the continent fits into the Air Force's thinking? Give us an insight into Arctic issues as well.*

Iris Ferguson

- The driving perspective of the Arctic Strategy is to understand the geophysical and geopolitical trends in the Arctic as they unfold on the ground. It is no longer a region we can take for granted.
- Homeland defence was a priority in the 2018 National Defence Strategy, and the Air Force has immense responsibility in this domain. The Air Force spends 80% of DOD funds in the Arctic.
- *Domain awareness* is the most important aspect; it allows the Air Force to detect and deter threats while understanding the surrounding environment.
- It is necessary for the Air Force to have trained and qualified personnel operating in the Arctic, as it is unlikely that substantial infrastructure buildup will take place in the near future. The United States must use its existing assets and personnel efficiently.
- Driving engagement with allies in the Arctic is necessary for a unified response to global security threats related to great power competition.

QUESTION: *How is the Arctic fitting into wider U.S. strategic and defence thinking?*

Lindsay Rodman

- Under the Trump administration, the Arctic was given more attention than it was under the Obama administration, as countering China and Russia in the region fit within the Trump administration's overarching foreign policy framework. The opening of a U.S. consulate in Nuuk, as well as the appointment of an Arctic special envoy displayed diplomatic commitment to the region.



- These trends should continue under the Biden administration, but because there is no singular Combatant Command (COCOM) for the Arctic given the global interests in the region, there could be friction.
- Opining about the future of a geopolitical region is not a normal thing for an armed forces service to do. The strategy towards the region should derive from pre-existing strategies, such as the Air Force Strategy, which is the “best written and makes the most sense.”
- If great power threats emerge in the Arctic, it is not obvious whether the U.S. will be putting significant investment towards new capabilities in the region.
- The Biden administration will likely pay attention to the Arctic in its efforts to address climate change and human security, perhaps a hard power approach will come later.

QUESTION: *Thinking about environmental changes, for example the melting permafrost due to climate change, how is the U.S. Air Force modifying its infrastructure to keep up?*

Iris Ferguson

- The most important goal is to ensure our threat detection and protection mechanisms, such as radars and air assets, function properly in order to defend our bases.
- The Air Force is concerned with melting of the permafrost, as it has already begun “tilting” radars and has caused airstrips to deteriorate.
- Working with Canada to bolster bilateral expeditionary capabilities in the Arctic is necessary to continuously repair infrastructure and to improve personnel mobility in the region.

QUESTION: *What is the appropriate “speed of relevance” to address emerging threats and security considerations in the Arctic?*

BGen Peter Fesler

- It is good that the various U.S. service branches are taking the Arctic into account. However, modernization must focus on improving the efficiency of pre-existing infrastructure and personnel. The U.S. is not looking to increase its “footprint” in the Arctic.
- The appropriate *speed of relevance* varies significantly based on the external threat, whether a ballistic missile or infrastructure deterioration.
- Great power competitors have invested in “below nuclear” attack capabilities, such as cyber warfare, more rapidly than the U.S. has invested in capabilities to defend from those types of attacks.



- NORAD is focused on “tangible gains” such as through the Pathfinder AI system, which processes data quickly to reveal patterns that suggest a kinetic or environmental threat could be coming. This allows U.S. service personnel to pursue deterrence measures before the threat manifests itself.
- NORAD seeks to enhance domain awareness at the “10 o’clock and 2 o’clock” approaches to the Arctic to improve personnel and asset mobility.

QUESTION: *From an Air Force point of view, how does domain awareness apply in a continental context? Does it follow a global approach?*

Iris Ferguson

- The Air Force Arctic Strategy is the basis for developing domain awareness. *Domain awareness* can be achieved through data collection and analysis in addition to the use of hard power.
- DOD tends to prioritize kinetic solutions to security threats but given the non-kinetic nature of many emerging threats, it is vital to employ non-kinetic deterrence.

QUESTION: *If NORAD modernization does not change its initial mission objectives, how do new threat domains fit into its approaches?*

BGen Peter Fesler

- We need an “all-domain” command and control system that allows data from different services and institutions to be processed together. NORAD can make quick decisions with this info-readiness, and we can have a common understanding of threat patterns with our allies.
- NORAD and NORTHCOM approaches can be integrated given they have the same commander, which would facilitate seamless cooperation with U.S. military services and NATO.
- The United States needs to invest in bolstering its communications networks in the High North so that data can be pulled from sensors and rapidly relayed to personnel on the ground.

QUESTION: *How can the United States see beyond NORAD/NORTHCOM to pursue an integrated approach to combating a wide range of homeland defence threats?*

Lindsay Rodman

- Great power adversaries fund and promote political extremism in the United States and the DOD strategy is “inadequate” to fight it effectively.



- Civilian agencies and organizations could be better at addressing some domestic problems, such as disinformation campaigns, but that avenue needs further analysis.
- Perhaps strengthening international law through binding multilateral agreements is a way to contend with foreign-influenced domestic security threats.

This report was funded in part by a grant from the United States Department of State. The opinions, findings and conclusions stated herein are those of the speakers and do not necessarily reflect those of the United States Department of State

► About the Author

Francis Finlayson is a recent graduate of the Bachelor of Global and International Studies program at Carleton University and is beginning an MA in International Affairs with a specialization in Security and Defence Policy at the Norman Paterson School of International Affairs this fall. Francis has researched a wide range of geopolitical topics, but is mainly interested in North American continental security, particularly as it relates to ballistic missile defence and asymmetric threats. Along with his studies, Francis is an outreach assistant with the Canadian Defence and Security Network based at Carleton University and volunteers with the Embassy of Canada to Mexico as part of the Canada-Mexico Youth Lab initiative.

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