



Canada's fighter jets need range and reliability to fulfill defence commitments in North America and around the world

Dr. Michael Byers is Canada Research Chair in Global Politics and International Law at the University of British Columbia. He is the author of [Who Owns the Arctic?](#) (2009), and [International Law and the Arctic](#) (2013).

CI: What do you think of recent developments in Canada's fighter jet procurement process?

Buying used F-18s from Australia is a mistake. Those aircraft have already flown many thousands of hours, which will negatively affect their reliability and incur high maintenance costs. It is odd that Canada has decided to buy used Boeing jets from Australia to avoid doing business with Boeing over a civil aircraft dispute, because Canada will still require the cooperation of Boeing for maintenance and replacement parts. The irony of this situation is that the Australians have older F-18s available for sale only because they bought some Super Hornets—the same type of plane that, until this fall, Canada was planning to buy.

CI: You are well known as an expert on Arctic security. Does the new Defence Policy – Strong, Secure, Engaged – reflect the importance of Arctic sovereignty to Canada?

The new Canadian defence policy does not pay much attention to issues of Arctic sovereignty and surveillance. The Arctic is perceived to have been part of former Conservative prime minister Stephen Harper's brand, and Justin Trudeau wants to differentiate himself from this. That said, when Stephane Dion was Minister of Foreign Affairs, he did try to use Arctic issues as an avenue for constructive engagement with Russia. However, the current Minister of Foreign Affairs, Chrystia Freeland, has an awful lot on her plate with the U.S. and NAFTA, and as a result Canada has neglected the international dimension of the Arctic since Dion's departure. Some of the persistent gaps in Canada's Arctic capabilities include a failure to replace aging icebreakers, radar stations, and Earth observation satellites.

CI: How important is the NORAD alliance to Canadian defence of the Arctic?

NORAD is the best way to defend the Arctic. Shared responsibility with the United States makes sense given the size and remoteness of the far north and the geographic contiguity of Alaska and the Yukon. The Arctic is a peaceful region that is well suited to moderate military investments focused on search and rescue and surveillance.

Canada has upheld its side of the NORAD bargain for decades through such contributions as the intercept capabilities of the CF-18s at Cold Lake and high quality radar imagery through RADARSAT-2. However, Canada cannot maintain a consistent commitment to the NORAD mission without investments in modernization, particularly in its fighter jets.

CI: How would the acquisition of Super Hornets support the imperatives of North American defence and Arctic sovereignty?

The F-18 and Super Hornet aircraft are well suited for the Arctic because they were built for the U.S. Navy with the mission of flying long distances over oceans. They have an impressive range that is compatible with the demands of the Canadian far north, where airfields are few and far between. Also, in remote areas, two engines are better than one because of the redundancy and therefore safety that they provide. It is this combination of range and reliability that led both the Canadians and the Americans to acquire the original F-18s.

Canada needs new fighter jets and it needs them quickly if it is to continue to fulfill its NORAD mission.

CI: How important is stealth given Canada's military commitments in North America and around the world?

In North America, the primary tasks are long-range surveillance and intercept capabilities. Stealth is not a priority. When Canadians are called upon to engage in missions overseas, they do not do it alone. They will always be part of a coalition with partners such as the United States, who will provide specialized aircraft with stealth and other narrowly-focused technologies.

Canada needs a modern, general utility aircraft such as the Super Hornet and can leave the more specialized equipment to others. The F-35 has stealth technology because of its particular mission, which is to serve as the "tip of the spear" in the initial operations against an enemy with anti-aircraft defences. Unless Canada is planning on being the sharp end of the American spear, in shock-and-awe missions overseas, we don't need stealth technology.