

Canada preparing to join US ballistic missile defense

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Canada's Liberal government is considering joining the US-led ballistic missile defense (BMD) system, reversing a decision taken 11 years ago by Paul Martin's minority Liberal government.

The reopening of the debate over Canadian participation in BMD was announced in the 30-page "consultation" document Defence Minister Harjit Sajjan issued last month to kick-off the Liberals' much-touted defence policy review.

Noting that Canada has not discussed its attitude towards the US missile defence program in over a decade, the "consultation" document presents the issue in a manner aimed at promoting Canada's participation. It states, "Given the increase in the number of countries with access to ballistic missile technology and their potential to reach North America, this threat is expected to endure and grow more sophisticated in the coming decades."

Its name notwithstanding, the US missile-defence system is anything but defensive. It is aimed at realizing US imperialism's longstanding goal of developing the technological means to wage a "winnable" nuclear war—a strategic question that has been receiving growing attention in ruling circles in Washington in recent months.

Over the past decade, the US has spent some \$100 billion on weapons to counter ballistic-missiles and it has partnered with NATO allies in Europe to station BMD equipment on that continent, as well as with Japan, South Korea and Australia in the Asia-Pacific.

Canada's renewed readiness to sign up to this reckless initiative reflects its close integration with US imperialism—the most destabilizing force in world politics. Canada is a major ally in the Obama administration's three major military-strategic offensives: in the Middle East, in Eastern Europe and the Baltic against Russia, and in the Asia-Pacific targeting China.

As Prime Minister Justin Trudeau has repeatedly stated, a key priority of his government is to deepen Canada-US cooperation. Toward that end, his government has announced a tripling of Canadian Special Forces' troops in Iraq and is considering deploying Canada's military in at

least half-a-dozen other countries, including Libya, Mali, and Haiti.

As with the Chretien Liberal government's decision not to participate in the Bush administration's 2003 invasion of Iraq, the rejection of missile defense two years later had nothing to do with opposition to US military aggression. The Martin Liberal government combined its rejection of BMD with a budget that pledged to boost military spending by \$13 billion over the next five years so as to demonstrate its commitment to an expanded and better-armed military.

If Liberal Prime Minister Paul Martin felt unable to approve Canadian participation in the US BMD program, it was because of the deep unpopularity of the Bush administration and the weak position of his Liberal Party, which was dependent on opposition support in parliament. Just a year later, Martin's minority Liberal government was defeated in the 2006 federal election and replaced by Stephen Harper and his Conservatives.

Nonetheless, the 2005 decision did create frictions. Bush waited over a week before returning a call placed by Martin to the White House to explain Ottawa's refusal to join BMD, and the corporate media was overwhelmingly critical of the Liberals' position. What support there was in the Canadian elite for Martin's decision was bound up with right-wing Canadian nationalism, including the claim that the BMD program would violate the country's sovereignty.

In an April 25 comment, the *Toronto Star's* Tim Harper notes that senior Canadian military officials have been lobbying to reverse the BMD decision virtually ever since the Martin government's 2005 announcement.

A key factor in the Liberals' determination to push forward with BMD is its intention to intensify cooperation with the US under the guise of "continental defence." The defence policy review document also contains proposals to expand or "modernize" NORAD, the Canada-US joint aerospace command set up in 1958.

Another significant consideration in the reopening of the missile defence debate is the increased focus in policymaking circles on the Arctic. The US and Canada

have seized on Russian military operations on its domestic territory in the Arctic to present Moscow as an aggressive player in the region that must be confronted. A number of reports and comments, including a study by the Conference of Defence Associations and the defence policy review consultation paper itself, point to concerns over the supposed dearth of Canadian military equipment and personnel in the region.

Canada's full integration into the missile defence system would give it additional leverage in its moves to extend its territorial claims in the area around the North Pole, where it is directly being challenged by counter-claims from Russia. Fellow NATO-member Denmark has also submitted its own claim to a large swathe of the Arctic Ocean, based on its control of Greenland, including waters and ocean-floor coveted by Canada.

While the Harper government was considering joining BMD prior to last year's election, the ruling elite concluded that the increased militarization of Canadian foreign policy and its further integration into US war plans against Russia and China could best be prepared with a Liberal government seeking to sell this reactionary agenda to the public behind a wave of "progressive" rhetoric. Sections of the ruling elite are concerned that this will become much more difficult should Republican frontrunner Donald Trump enter the White House after the US election this November.

The Liberals were discussing plans to deepen ties with US imperialism long before coming to power. Last June, Trudeau delivered an important speech calling for "real change" in Canada-US relations. One of his central demands was greater continental policy coordination between Washington and Ottawa to better project their common interests on a range of issues. This topic has been raised again in the current debate. Proponents of Canada's participation in BMD argue that the current situation in which Canadian Armed Forces' personnel are active in NORAD, which is responsible for providing radar data to the BMD system, but have no say in how the missile defense system is positioned and used, is untenable and poses a grave danger to Canadian geopolitical interests.

Barely two weeks after the Liberals' sweeping victory in the October 19 election, the Centre on International Policy Studies think-tank issued a report urging the new government to reverse the missile defense decision as part of its declared goal of "reengaging" Canada on the global stage. One of the report's authors, Bob McRae, Canada's former ambassador to NATO, provocatively proclaimed at a public forum held at the University of Ottawa as the study was released, "Splendid isolation is not an option for Canada."

At the same time, Sajjan received briefing material from

the military, as part of his transition into office, which underlines the top brass's support for BMD. "The strategic importance of ballistic missile defense," said one briefing paper, "has increased in recent years."

The Trudeau government offered a further signal of its intent to join BMD with its appointment of Bill Graham to the panel of four experts that is overseeing the defence policy review. A former Liberal defence minister, Graham is a strong advocate of missile defense. He told a Senate committee in May 2014 that participation in BMD was essential to protecting Canada's privileged military-security relationship with Washington. "It seems to me," said Graham, "we're outside of an extraordinarily complex and amazingly new form of a weapons system which will affect our security but which we are foreign to decisions around its development. I think that's a dangerous place to be."

The Liberals and Conservatives on the Senate committee joined together to unanimously recommend Canada join BMD.

A Liberal decision to join BMD would be welcomed by the opposition Conservatives. Asked about the issue last month, former defence minister and likely Conservative leadership candidate Jason Kenny declared. "This is, I think, an obligation for us."

The New Democratic Party, which opposed joining in 2005 and described BMD as "weaponizing space," has criticized the Liberals for reopening the debate. Defence critic Randall Garrison said he had "a bad feeling" about the proposal, and told the *Ottawa Citizen* he feared it would trigger an arms race. Such hand-wringing is worth little coming from a party that has supported one imperialist military intervention after another beginning with Canada's involvement in the NATO-led bombardment of Yugoslavia in 1999 and is on record as favouring increased military spending.



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