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Archaic system stands on guard

A 55-page Senate defence committee report tells us the alarming news that "hostile bombers could fly undetected into the heart of North America." True enough but hardly a startling revelation.

Back in February, 1983, U.S. Secretary of Defence Caspar Weinberger issued a thorough study on continental air defence that found: "Currently, Soviet bombers flying at low altitudes could penetrate undetected through gaps in radar coverage over Canada and our ocean approaches." Note the more direct language of the U.S. statement.

What both reports tell us is that our air defence system, built in the 1950s, is so archaic as to be almost useless. The DEW (Distant Early Warning) Line radar screen is full of gaps and easily jammed. Over the past 20 years, other radar lines, interceptor aircraft and anti-aircraft missiles have been junked.

Today, all of North America's airspace is defended by only 261 antique U.S. interceptors and 54 Canadian planes. Most of these interceptors date from the 1950s and are older than the pilots who must risk flying them.

Until recently, the conventional wisdom held that there was no need to maintain defences against bombers in an era of missiles. To the surprise of many, Russia then developed its new Black-jack bomber, a huge, supersonic plane that can fly below North American radar coverage, delivering bombs and cruise missiles.

The Soviets are producing 30 Blackjacks a year. Almost equally menacing, they have started production again on the giant TU-95 Bear turboprop bomber, probably as a cruise missile carrier. Russia's 110 TU-22 Backfire bombers can also cover all of North America if refueled over the Arctic.

What all this means is that Russia can today throw some 250 heavy bombers against North America. By the end of 1985 the number will have risen to 300. So much for our hope that Russia would not build more bombers if we allowed our air defences to lapse.

During this year, Russia will also begin deploying two new cruise missiles on its bombers. While larger and perhaps less accurate than American versions, these weapons still pose an enormous threat. Soviet bombers can fire them over the Beaufort Sea — far north of our interceptor or even current radar coverage.

Responding to this growing threat, the U.S. defence department formulated a comprehensive plan in 1983 that called for the following major improvements in continental air defences:

- The new North Warning System. Thirty-nine two-dimensional radars and 15 large, three-dimensional systems, backed by three new command centres — all joined by high-speed data links. This system is to replace the obsolete DEW Line radars. Cost \$800 million.

- Over-the-horizon radar that bounces beams off the ionosphere. It can detect low-flying enemy aircraft at distances of 1,900 miles and will cover land and maritime approaches. Cost: \$1.4 billion.

- Replacement of U.S. F-106 and Canadian CF-101 antique, 1950s interceptors. The U.S. would like 144 F-15s with look-down, shoot-down radar and missiles. Canada is forming two squadrons of its new CF-188 (F-18s) for the air defence role. Cost to the U.S.: \$5.3 billion.

- Deployment of 12 AWACS (Airborne Warning and Control Systems) radar planes that would plug gaps in the radar screen and vector interceptors against enemy targets. Cost: \$3 billion.

While the air threat to North America mounts, the U.S. Congress has, so far, delayed funding for these essential programs. As time passes, the estimated system costs are rising and may soon reach \$18 billion. Canada, for its part, has agreed to some modest contributions for the North Warning System but has resolutely ignored the larger problem.

Defence scientists are now feverishly trying to develop a space-based surveillance system, using focal plane arrays, that can target low-flying aircraft and cruise missiles. The U.S. is reported to have made some important advances in this emerging technology last year.

This space-based approach makes good sense, as the Senate report indicated. But then, in a dazzling example of fecklessness, Liberal Senator Paul Lafond suggested that Canada put up its own satellites — so they would not be confused with Ronald Reagan's wicked Star Wars system.

Lafond then proposed that Canadian satellites be "dedicated to passive detection and surveillance" (only!) rather than being linked to any weapons system. What this means, simply, is that we will spend close to \$1 billion in order to have 30 minutes warning that Soviet bombers and missiles are on the way.

Of course, we will not be able to do anything about them — except ask questions in Parliament. This has got to be the silliest defence suggestion of the decade.

Canada, like it or not, will have to come up with a great deal of money for air defence. New Soviet cruise missiles will mean having to move radars much further north. We will need more aircraft, participation in AWACS and better communications.

If Canada is not prepared to come up with serious financial support for urgently needed air defences, then it may well see the U.S. act unilaterally. This means new American radar and aircraft bases in the Canadian Arctic. If Canada will not defend its own airspace, America will have to.

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