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U.S. beefs up air defences

Canada's collection of anti-cruise missile agitators are now facing a threat that may be even worse than the spectre of instant nuclear vaporization. People are getting very bored with the whole issue. Even the media, which has played up each carefully staged demonstration, shows obvious signs of ennui.

But all is not lost. Soon we will be seeing another issue that will reinvigorate the flagging spirits of Canada's cruise missile opponents. Sometime in the next few years, American AWACS radar planes may be flying over the peaceful dells of northern Canada.

The Russians, who already have enough heavy missiles to remove a good portion of the topsoil of North America, will shortly be fielding a completely new, long-ranged bomber — the TU-160 Blackjack. Larger than the American B-1, this heavy bomber will be able to carry nuclear bombs and newly developed cruise missiles. In addition to Russia's existing long- and medium-ranged bomber force of some 685 aircraft, the Blackjack is posing a very serious threat to Canada and the U.S.

This threat is particularly worrying because our North American defences against air attack have been allowed to atrophy to the point where they are incapable of halting any serious Russian bomber attack. Our primary early warning radar system, the DEW Line, was built in the early 1950s: It is obsolete, inefficient and costly to operate.

Most important, our radar net has many vulnerable gaps in its northern coverage and along the seaward approaches to North America. U.S. military experts are convinced that almost half of an attacking Russian bomber force could reach Northern Ontario before being detected by radar.

Conscious of this growing threat, the U.S. is moving rapidly to enhance our air defences. A new series of completely automated radar stations are being built in the far north, supported by new computer-controlled command centres that can relay threat data in real time (instantaneously) to NORAD's headquarters at Cheyenne Mountain in Colorado.

Modernizing North Bay facility

Canada's primary air-defence location at North Bay is being upgraded with high-speed computers from Hughes Aircraft and more secure communication links.

Identifying attackers is, of course, not enough. NORAD's interceptor force has almost withered away after years of neglect. All anti-aircraft missiles have been scrapped. Our joint interceptor force consists of 54 Canadian CF-101 Voodoos, 150 F-106s, 18 F-15s and 90 F-4 Phantoms.

The Voodoos and F-106s, built in the 1950s, are so old that they are probably more of a danger to their own pilots than to the Russians. This puny force is in stark contrast to Russia's 630,000 air-defence personnel, who man over 2,200 interceptors, 13,000 anti-aircraft missiles and 7,000 radars.

Part of the \$7.8 billion allocated for air defence by the U.S. (far more than the total Canadian defence budget) is being allocated to purchase 144 new F-15s, the world's finest interceptor. Other funds are being spent on back-scatter radars that follow the earth's curvature and on phased-array systems that will cover the maritime approaches to North America.

These improvements are impressive, but they are not strong enough, even in their planned form, to halt a concerted Russian bomber attack.

Not enough interceptors

The major weakness in our air-defence posture is the lack of an adequate number of interceptors. This problem makes it essential that AWACS airborne radar aircraft be deployed: Their powerful, long-ranged radars and data links can reportedly track over 100 targets at the same time, spot low-flying aircraft, and vector interceptors onto attacking bombers. These force multipliers are the key element in NORAD's air-defence plan.

According to Pentagon reports, some of these AWACS aircraft will be based in Canada and will likely carry mixed American-Canadian crews. So just as the Canadian left has exhausted the cruise missile issue, they will be presented with yet another example of what they see as America's heinous plot to threaten the peace-loving Russians.

We can probably expect to see more throngs of demonstrators waving placards saying, "Abort the AWACS" before the cameras of the obliging media. Our left-wing churchmen will chorus, "Get the Pentagon out of Canada." And our political leaders, following their jellyfish-like response to the cruise missile testing issue, will doubtlessly delay and prevaricate, hoping that somehow the whole matter will just go away.

But it won't, of course. All of those new Russian bombers have pre-set courses right over Canada. North Bay and Sudbury, the Welland Canal and the St. Lawrence Seaway, Windsor, Vancouver, Halifax and Gander are all without doubt on Russia's target list in the event of a war, not to mention thousands of strategic targets in the U.S. Curiously, Ottawa does not seem to be a high-priority target for the Russians.

These frightening realities cannot be avoided but our resident protestors probably will, as was once said of Eleanor Roosevelt, "continue to trip down the rosey path of idealism, unplucked by the thorns of reason."

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