

EXPLAINERS

Canada Wants Into a Northern Defence Network That Doesn't Stop at NORAD.

Canada has applied to join the UK-led Joint Expeditionary Force, adding another northern defence relationship alongside NORAD and NATO.

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Illustration: Nasty Canuck / AI-assisted.

Canada has formally applied to join the UK-led Joint Expeditionary Force, a 10-country military partnership focused on the High North, North Atlantic and Baltic region. It would not replace NORAD or NATO. It could give Canada another way to train, plan and operate with countries facing many of the same northern-security problems.

Canada's defence architecture has long rested heavily on **NORAD for continental defence** and **NATO for collective transatlantic defence**.

Now Ottawa wants another operational relationship in the North.

On Sept. 16, Prime Minister Mark Carney announced that Canada had **formally applied to join the Joint Expeditionary Force**, or JEF, during a meeting in Liverpool with British Prime Minister Andy Burnham. The United Kingdom supports Canada's participation, but there has been no announcement that Canada has been admitted. The Prime Minister's Office confirmed the application and UK support.

That makes this an application story, not a membership story. But the application itself is worth understanding because the JEF occupies a useful space in the northern defence architecture.

What the JEF actually is

The Joint Expeditionary Force brings together **10 Northern European NATO countries**: the United Kingdom, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Iceland, Latvia, Lithuania, the Netherlands, Norway and Sweden. The UK serves as the framework nation. The JEF describes its core geography as stretching across NATO's northern flank, from the High North and North Atlantic to the Baltic Sea region.

Unlike NATO, the JEF has **no Article 5-style collective-defence obligation**. It is a flexible military framework through which participating governments can train, plan and, when they choose, deploy together.

It is also **not a standing force**. The JEF's official policy direction says the UK can conduct a JEF activity with one or more participating countries, while each country decides for itself whether to contribute forces to a particular activity or deployment.

That flexibility is part of what makes the group relevant to Canada.

Canada already has NORAD. This does something different.

NORAD is a binational Canada-U.S. command responsible for **aerospace warning, aerospace control and maritime warning for North America**. Canadian and American personnel operate inside an integrated command structure focused on continental defence. NORAD describes those three missions here.

NATO provides a different layer. Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty says an armed attack against one Ally is considered an attack against all, creating the alliance's core collective-defence commitment.

The JEF sits alongside those structures rather than replacing them. Its policy says it is designed to complement existing international frameworks, uses NATO standards and doctrine as its baseline and can support NATO or other multinational operations.

For Canada, that potentially adds a smaller northern grouping whose members already spend a great deal of time thinking about the Arctic, North Atlantic and northern Europe.

Look at the map and the Canadian connection gets clearer

At a March JEF summit, participating governments described the **Baltic Sea region, High North and North Atlantic as one interconnected strategic area**. They also welcomed Carney's remote participation and said the group intended to make greater use of its experience operating across the Arctic, High North, North Atlantic and Baltic Sea region. The JEF leaders' statement lays out that northern focus.

Canada's security problems are not identical to those of Norway, Finland or the Baltic states. Canada has vastly more territory, much lower population density across its North and infrastructure challenges that are uniquely Canadian.

But many of the practical defence questions overlap: moving people and equipment over long distances, protecting ports and airfields, maintaining communications, monitoring maritime approaches and critical infrastructure, operating in harsh environments and making sure allied forces can work together when needed.

Those problems are easier to work through in exercises than during a crisis.

Canada has already been operating with the JEF

The application did not come out of nowhere.

The Royal Canadian Air Force participated in **TARASSIS**, a JEF-led multinational exercise held in October 2025. Canadian personnel operated from Ämari Air Base in Estonia, while Canadian assets also conducted operations involving Finland, Lithuania and Latvia. The RCAF described the exercise as a test of its ability to operate in contested, degraded and operationally limited environments. The RCAF's account of TARASSIS is here.

The relationship advanced again in March. Carney participated in a JEF leaders' meeting as a **special invitee**, where the group discussed security in Northern Europe, the North Atlantic and the Arctic. The PMO readout also specifically referenced Canada's participation in TARASSIS.

That gives the relationship a fairly clear progression:

Exercise together. Talk together. Apply to join.

The next step is whether the application becomes membership — and what Canada would actually do with it.

This does not make NORAD less important

Canada's geography ensures that continental defence will remain deeply integrated with the United States.

NORAD has been a formal binational command since 1958, and its missions now span aerospace warning, aerospace control and maritime warning. Additional northern partnerships do not change the physical reality of defending North America alongside the United States.

The JEF would add another layer.

NORAD concentrates on North America. NATO provides the much larger collective-defence alliance. The JEF offers a smaller, flexible grouping concentrated in a northern region that increasingly overlaps Canada's own Arctic and North Atlantic concerns.

Those structures can coexist because they do different jobs.

There is an industrial relationship developing beside it

The Carney-Burnham meeting included two other defence files that are worth watching without folding them into conclusions they do not yet support.

Canada and Britain discussed potential defence-industrial cooperation through the **Global Combat Air Programme**, or GCAP. Canada became the programme's **first observer nation** in July. National Defence described observer status as an opportunity to assess possible future participation and explore industrial cooperation.

Canada and the UK are also working toward a permanent **BATUS Future** arrangement at CFB Suffield in Alberta. British forces have trained at Suffield since **1972**, and Ottawa says the proposed new arrangement would put greater emphasis on developing and testing equipment and emerging technology. CFB Suffield's history and BATUS role are described by the Canadian Army.

Those are important signals, but they should not be allowed to say more than the evidence supports.

GCAP observer status does not mean Canada has selected a future fighter. Discussions about industrial cooperation do not establish Canadian workshare. And BATUS Future still has to become a permanent arrangement and then produce actual investment and activity.

What they do show is a broader Canada-UK defence relationship developing alongside the JEF application.

Application first. Details next.

Important questions are still unanswered.

The Canadian and British announcements do not spell out an acceptance timetable, routine Canadian force contributions, financial commitments or additional readiness requirements. Nor would membership automatically require Canada to participate whenever other JEF countries act: under the existing model, participation in a particular activity remains a sovereign national decision.

Those details will determine how much practical difference Canadian membership eventually makes.

For now, the application points to a broader shift in Canada's northern defence relationships. NORAD remains central to continental defence. NATO remains the larger collective-defence alliance. The JEF would add a smaller, more flexible grouping whose core geography overlaps Canada's own Arctic and North Atlantic concerns.

That does not move Canada away from North America.

It gives Canada another direction in which to look north.

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