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From: Christopher Worswick
To: Concerned Canadians
Re: HOLD THE OUTRAGE AND JUST BUY THE F-35s

Canadian anger toward Donald Trump is understandable, but there is a real risk that this leads to poor policy choices. A case in point is the growing pressure to revisit the decision to buy a fleet of American F-35 fighter jets.

In economics, we think that governments should set policy goals, then decide how many workers to employ and how much capital equipment to use in order to achieve those goals at as low a cost as possible.

A key goal underlying the decision to buy new jets is to protect Canada from military intervention by hostile countries. Swedish Gripen fighter jets are less costly, but also less militarily effective than the F-35s. Given this cost difference, the key question is whether the policy goal of keeping Canada safe from foreign aggression can be achieved using Gripens instead of F-35s.

The Canadian military has consistently ranked the F-35 as the best fighter jet to meet Canadian defence goals. It is a fifth-generation fighter jet considered to be more effective than the Chinese and Russian fifth-gen fighters.

In contrast, the Gripen is considered at best a 4.5-generation fighter in part because it lacks full stealth capabilities. If, say, Russia were to attempt to seize a Canadian Arctic island a fleet of Canadian F-35s would be more likely to prevent it than a fleet of Canadian Gripens – at least that is what the Canadian military's assessment suggests.

There is, of course, a key strategic component to this. It is worth considering different scenarios where Canadian fighter jets might be used, to see if strategic considerations would elevate the Gripen above the F-35, in terms of meeting Canada's needs.

Buying a fleet of American F-35s would support the joint Canada-US defence of North America. Since 1958, the highly successful NORAD partnership has protected us from the risk of air attack.

If we invest in a Canadian F-35 fleet, that would be a strong signal that, despite our current differences with the United States, Canada fully supports NORAD. However, if we diversify our air defence by purchasing European fighter jets, we will be sending mixed signals, and an America First administration might use this as a reason to abandon or water down NORAD, weakening Canadian security.

Another scenario, which almost a third of Canadians believe is likely, is that the United States invades Canada. In this unlikely event, our southern neighbour's powerful military means that, realistically, neither F-35s nor Gripens would prevent this, so no clear advantage to the Gripen over the F-35 emerges.

What about the scenario in which Canada needs to send fighter jets to operate outside of Canada, as it has at least four times in the past 35 years? The most likely situation would be one where Russia attacks a European NATO ally. In this case, F-35s would be the more effective fighter.

The United States would likely also support the NATO ally in need, but there may be concern that it might refuse to participate and hold back vital supplies needed to support Canadian and European F-35s. Even if this were true, the fact that Gripens use an American-built engine suggests that there is no obvious advantage from a Canadian fleet of Gripens.

Working through these scenarios suggests the F-35 remains the more effective fighter jet. Canada might consider a mixed fleet of both F-35s and Gripens. However, the cost and operational complexity would be greater, meaning that focusing on an F-35 fleet would be superior and potentially free up government funds that could support other defence or non-defence policy priorities.

Buying F-35s does not mean Canada needs to acquiesce to American demands and not have independent foreign policy. There are a number of historical cases where Canada pursued different policies in spite of our joint defence agreement.

Examples include Canada's decisions to stay out of the Vietnam War in the 1960s and the Iraq War in the early 2000s – decisions that were no doubt displeasing to the U.S. administrations of the day. In each of these instances, there was never any discussion about leaving NORAD. It was understood that the most important thing about our relationship is mutual defence and that remains the case today.

Canada should not allow the strong emotions of the moment to cloud our judgment. NORAD should be the last of our relationships with the United States that we consider unwinding. Canada can most effectively support our national sovereignty through maintaining our commitment to purchase the F-35 fleet.

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