

Canadian Jets Repel Russian Bombers

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OTTAWA – Canadian fighter jets scrambled to repel Russian bombers that made several attempts to probe Canadian airspace on Wednesday.

QMI Agency has learned that two CF-18s took off from CFB Bagotville to intercept two TU-95 long range bombers about 463 km east of Goose Bay, N.L.

Attempts by Russia to test Canadian airspace have been going on since 2007; military and intelligence analysts tell QMI Agency the frequency has been increasing since then, but one senior official described Wednesday's event as "not the usual s-t."

"The response as always was a rapid, effective deterrent," Defence Minister Peter MacKay told QMI Agency.

"They were in the buffer zone," said MacKay, stressing that although the planes did not enter Canada's sovereign airspace, the bombers did come inside the 300 nautical mile zone that Canada claims.

"They did not give us any advance notice," said MacKay, adding that NORAD fighter jets have intercepted between 12 and 18 Russian bombers per year since 2007. After the CF-18s made contact with the Russians the pilots shadowed them until the bombers turned northeast and headed out of Canadian airspace.

The TU-95 bomber, known as the Bear, is capable of carrying nuclear weapons and may have been loaded with warheads on this trip. One military analyst tells QMI Agency the Russians have been known to fly with nukes on board just to flex their muscle and prove to the world they are still a powerful country.

"We certainly weren't aware of what if any weapons were on board," said MacKay.

Canada is in a race with Russia and other Arctic nations to lay claim to the frozen territory that may hold untold treasures.

Geologists believe the Arctic shelf holds vast stores of oil, natural gas, diamonds, gold and minerals. A 2007 Russian intelligence report predicted that conflict with other Arctic nations is a distinct possibility, including military action "in a competition for resources." The United States, Norway, and Denmark (through Greenland) also lay claim to portions of the Arctic seabed based on their coastal waters.

China, which does not have an Arctic coast, has sent icebreakers and ships into the Arctic Ocean. A Chinese admiral said earlier this year since China has 20% of the world's

population, they should have 20% of Arctic resources.

The incursion into Canadian airspace also comes as debate rages over whether Canada needs the next generation of fighter jets to replace the nearly 30-year-old CF 18s. The Harper government has committed to buying 65 F-35 stealth fighters at a cost of \$9 billion. Critics have said such Cold War-type jets are no longer needed.

Rob Huebert of the University of Calgary's Centre for Military and Strategic Studies tells QMI Agency the Canadian Air Force needs to upgrade its fleet now that Russia is upgrading its bombers.

"The mere fact that the Russians are building the next generation of bombers means that we need something or we need to accept that the Americans will do it for us," Huebert said.

"This is about a Russian military resurgence, the Russians asserting their authority in the north," military analyst Mercedes Stephenson told QMI Agency.

Stephenson says that after the Cold War ended the Russian military was in a shambles but the last few years have seen a lot of money poured into restoring past glories, particularly in the air force.

Asked if he was playing up this Russian incursion to boost support for the F-35 purchase, MacKay said no.

"Surely even the most cynical, partisan person would not suggest that we engineered the visit of a Russian bomber to boost support for our air force," said MacKay.

Previous Russian incursions into Canadian airspace

February 2009: Hours before U.S. President Barack Obama's big visit to Canada, two Russian bombers were intercepted just outside the Canadian Arctic.

Two Canadian CF-18s were dispatched to signal the Russian aircraft to turn back to its own airspace.

The Russians called Canada's reaction "a farce."

General Walter Natynczyk, the chief of the defence staff, said, at the time, sporadic incidences of Russian incursions had started in 2007 after many years of no activity.

August 2008: Canadian jets scrambled during a visit by Prime Minister Stephen Harper to Inuvik in the Arctic to intercept an aircraft nearing Canada's airspace.

Defence Minister Peter MacKay said Russians were unwilling to notify Canada of planned military flights nearing our airspace.

September 2007: Russians boasted that two of their Tu-95 bombers flew along the coasts of Alaska and Canada and returned via the North Pole during a 17-hour flight. They said their flight was accompanied by NATO planes.

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