

Drawing Lessons for Australia from Sweden And Canada's Approach to National Defence

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Introduction

At the Air and Space Power Conference 2026, contemporary lessons on national defence strategies and forward-thinking ideas shaped the discussions on the future of air power. Senior leaders from multiple Air Forces, academia and industry partners worldwide came together to share insights and consider how small to middle power nations can adapt and innovate in a modern warfare environment. The individual reflections provided by Brigadier-General Niclas Magnusson (Deputy Commander of Swedish Air Force) and Lieutenant-General Jamie Speiser-Blanchet (Commander of Royal Canadian Air Force) highlighted that demonstrating deterrence in a fast-evolving global threat landscape is not a "one size fits all" endeavour. Instead, it is about how each nation optimises their specific geography, connectivity and tactical approach. Exploring the Swedish and Canadian strategies determine how other Air Forces are building fighting depth in space, time and posture in their own unique ways.

Size and Geography

Geography dictates the engineering of a nation's air power. For Sweden, its small size defines its operational reality. This has allowed for a defence model meticulously optimised for the "short range" and toward a single chain of command. This ensures rapid innovation, which allows them to operate aircraft they built. This commitment to domestic innovation supports a unique "quick-turnaround" culture, which is effective for their size. By maintaining this level of control over their assets, the Swedish Air Force achieves a level of tactical agility that allows them to respond to regional threats with extreme speed and still providing support to their Navy and Army forces. In this environment, the ability to generate intense effects within a concentrated geographic footprint is the foundation for building fighting depth in space.

Canada, by contrast, must contend with being the world's second largest country. With three oceans surrounding the country and the arctic to its north, threats can come from any direction. For them, geography is a constant challenge especially with their vastness, extreme weather and limited infrastructure. These conditions mean that their national defence cannot rely on proximity or rapid concentration of force. To combat this, the RCAF is investing in new capabilities that will allow them to reach further and increase their ability to remain effective over long duration. The reality of needing better mobility, greater reach and endurance defines their approach to building fighting depth in space.

Connectivity

Connectivity defines how nations project influence through partnership, but the path to achieving it varies significantly between these two nations. Sweden is currently navigating a historic strategic pivot, moving from its previous policy of non-alignment to full NATO

integration. The focus of this new integration is an intense commitment to the Nordic cooperation. It also offers a critical opportunity to address the limitations of being solely self-reliant. This shift enables their nation to build fighting depth in time, as it will increase their level of interoperability and information sharing. As a result, their awareness and ability to anticipate what is coming will dramatically improve as well.

For Canada, deep roots define their connectivity rather than new beginnings. Their long-standing relationships as a member of NORAD, NATO and FVEY establish the foundation of their defence approach. While Sweden is adapting to a new alliance, the Canadian's focus is on sustaining and modernising its established relationships with the US and other trusted partners like Australia. As a result, the challenge for them lies in having a balanced information sharing. Since they are a nation deeply embedded in global intelligence networks, RCAF must strengthen its interoperability while simultaneously protecting sensitive national information. To build their fighting depth in time, a delicate approach to transparency is required. Thus, finding a method to share enough information to stay aligned with their allies while protecting their nation's interests is key to improve their interoperability.

Tactical Approach

The tactical approach of these two nations reflects different societal and technical philosophies where one is rooted in the total defence concept and the other in digital transformation. Sweden's "dispersed base concept" is the foundation of their tactical approach. This strategy prioritises survivability through camouflage, deception and extreme dispersion. By making it harder for an adversary to find their target, the Swedish ensures its force can demonstrate deterrence and adopt a more proactive approach. Their conscription-based force supports this and earns their military deep societal support. The "whole of society" structure helps build their fighting depth in posture as it allows them to be resilient and ready to fight. Conscription creates a mutual trust and a shared national belief in the importance of defence. By bringing in talent from across society into military, Sweden can embrace the quick turnaround culture and fosters readiness at all levels. For Sweden, embracing change means constantly refining their dispersed tactics to ensure they remain unpredictable and ready.

On the other hand, Canada's approach centres on digital modernisation and cultural transformation. The focus is on modernisation through digital systems and delivery of new capabilities at speed. The RCAF is adapting to a fifth generation ecosystem with the aims of being able to "detect first, decide first and act first." Supporting this technical modernisation is their cultural transformation that prioritises inclusion, innovation and growth through optimised and technically informed training. Their tactical approach highlights that to build fighting depth in posture, embracing change in both their capabilities and people is vital to enable resilience and to meet their country's needs. Furthermore, the RCAF is aiming to engage with the wider Canadian community, leveraging partnerships with academia and industry to increase their national security literacy. For Canada, the tactical edge comes from the speed of innovation and the strength of the people behind the technology.

While Sweden and Canada are different in many aspects, their paths to readiness and building their own fighting depth in space, time and posture rely on the same fundamental pillars: technological innovation, established partnerships and a culture that embraces rapid change. Whether it is Sweden's ability to disappear into its own geography through dispersed bases, or Canada's ability to project power across an expansive landscape through digital modernisation, both nations are working towards the same goal of credible deterrence when strategic winter comes.

Implementing Lessons in an Australian Context

Sweden's approach to national defence underlines the importance of agility and innovation.

- We should think outside the box and find different ways to fight.
- We should exercise and master the art of camouflage and deception to become a difficult target with increased agility.
- We should also aim to innovate domestically and invest on our local assets to generate asymmetric advantage.
- We could develop mobile teams to refuel and rearm aircraft on highways.
- We could adopt a “whole-of-society” approach to boost readiness at all levels and to build deep societal trust.

Meanwhile, Canada teaches us to improve our endurance and connectivity. Like Canada, threats can come from anywhere and we should maintain agility to posture accordingly.

- We should leverage our geography and turn vast distances and our shores into strategic assets. This would mean the continued emphasise that Northern Australia is central to our nation’s defence posture and prioritise its development.
- We should recognise that we too are surrounded by three oceans (Indian, Southern and Pacific) with Antarctica to our south. This could involve more realistic exercises from our southern bases.
- We should also sustain our relationships and integrate deeply with our trusted allies to enhance others’ strengths and compensate for each other’s weaknesses.

Our Air Force aims to better defend Australia and advance our interests. Therefore, it is vital that we learn from our strategic partners to maximise our capabilities. This is to ensure that we can generate and exploit depth in space, time and posture to give Australians more options in more places, more often. What this looks like at the everyday level for aviators will be explored in my next blog.