

Strategic Cousins: Interoperability between Australia and Canada

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Introduction

Australia and Canada, though oceans apart, share many similarities and challenges. The 2026 Air and Space Power Conference spotlighted an important knowledge gap – how can the RAAF and Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF) learn from each other. While a member of the Five Eyes, the RCAF and the Canadian Armed Forces more generally, is the force I, and many of my fellow aviators, have the least involvement with. This blog seeks to mitigate this and highlight the similarities and shared challenges of the RAAF and RCAF and propose ways that we can cooperate and bring more to the fight together. This blog will explore the opportunities and challenges for the Royal Australian Air Force and the Royal Canadian Air Force to continue building upon their shared history, whilst preparing for future threats we may face together.

Context

As the contest between the world's superpowers intensifies, the positioning of the remaining nations grows in importance and makes middle powers relationships, like those with Australia and Canada, more important than ever. The challenge for both nations now lies in their ability to build fighting depth across space, time and posture whilst developing multilateral defence and industrial partnerships to shape influence and ensure a free and prosperous Indo-Pacific.

Whilst we remain oceans apart, the Australian-Canadian relationship is one of a shared history bound by common values. Our similarities far outweigh our differences, and our fighting potency will be increased if we both leverage our key strengths together. Canada, the world's second-largest country by area, suffers from similar constraints to Australia, both having centralised populations and vast areas of barren, unused territory to defend.

Depth in Space

Depth in space seeks to turn geographic scale from a constraint into an operational advantage through dispersed access and agile manoeuvre. The RCAF's modernisation plan enables a close partnership with the RAAF, allowing the sharing of deep operational knowledge to support the introduction of new platforms and technologies and to drive greater flexibility in asset employment across training, combat, and HADR environments. In turn, the RCAF may be able to provide a long history of dispersed and agile operations in extreme conditions, the resilience instilled in their aviators, and the sustainment challenges posed by extreme landscapes, to the RAAF as we continue to be focused, not fixated, on our northern approaches.

With reduced warning times and an increasing requirement for adaptable, multi-skilled aviators and dispersed, scalable operating locations capable of supporting rapid transition between training, combat, and contingency operations, the RAAF and RCAF share a continued emphasis on investing in their people and bases. For the RAAF, substantial investment continues to expand northern bases and to provide air power dependencies, such as fuel and weapons, in greater quantities. For the RCAF, Prime Minister Mark Carney's March 2026 announcement of CAD \$40 billion for new and improved forward operating bases to secure the North shows allies and partners that Canada and the RCAF remain committed as global players in shaping perceptions of their national strength and influencing adversaries through deterrence. Unsurprisingly, both nations understand the importance of the air domain in a strategy of denial and the need to ensure the readiness of people and places when operating in uncertain and contested environments.

Depth in Time

Depth in time is realised through early sensing and rapid decision-making, enabling a force to act at a moment of choice rather than in reaction. The announcement of Canada's purchase of the Over The Horizon Radar (OTHR) has seen the two nations collaborate across all levels of industry and government to replicate the Australian Jindalee Joint Over The Horizon Network (JORN), operated by 1RSU. This capability will ensure the RCAF can detect and track aircraft and vessels across the air, space, and maritime domains in its Arctic and polar regions. The project provides depth in time, as described by Commander Royal Canadian Air Force LTGEN Speiser-Blanchet enabling the RCAF to "detect first, decide first, and act first". For Canada, its geographic location and its importance within NORAD in providing air sovereignty for North America mean it can detect, deter, and defend against threats to the continent.

Fixing the foundations of capabilities for success is critical for the RCAF, as Canada's geographic size is seen as a continental North American problem rather than just a Canadian one. Advances in space and cyber continue to evolve at speed, Canada is recognising the 360-degree nature of its geography, as well as shorter warning times. Much like Australia, strength across all five domains is required for national defence, and there are lessons to be learned and shared across similar terrains, e.g., Australia's outback vs. Canada's tundra, and comparisons between Arctic and Antarctic landscapes. This rounded approach will ensure that Canada and the RCAF can adapt to current and emerging challenges and threats more swiftly.

Depth in Posture

Depth in posture is generated through resilience, sustainability, adaptability, and scalability, enabling a force to absorb disruption and sustain effects over time. For both the RAAF and RCAF, operating from austere environments and modernising force generation systems are central to building a posture capable of enduring contest. As countries with vast coastlines, we both rely heavily on the air domain and air power to not only ensure national defence but also to supply and sustain civil and military goods. Whilst Australia's north experiences inclement weather and is prone to severe flooding, Canada suffers from long, arduous Arctic winters, making operating in similar austere and challenging environments critical to their resilience. Spanning three oceans and facing challenges from melting sea ice, control of the air is crucial to Canada's national security and remains a key RCAF focus.

As Australia has seen in recent years, Canada's future introduction of the P-8A Poseidon aircraft will give the RCAF greater adaptability to respond to threats and cover far greater distances than before, whilst providing intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance to control the air domain. This, along with other investments in aircraft announced as part of the 2023 *Royal Canadian Air Force Strategy*, will see the RAAF and RCAF operate a range of similar

assets, enabling greater interoperability and a future focus on operating together in a contested environment. For both air forces, this will enable greater cooperation and deliver training outcomes for both nations' aviators, enabling future force generation and integration. For Canada in particular, modernisation at pace is required to ensure that the human component of the RCAF can sustain the largest transformation in posture for decades.

Implementing Lessons in the Australian Context

To deepen our partnership with Canada, there are three key opportunities identified to improve RAAF and RCAF interoperability:

- Further integration between the RCAF and RAAF in the development of current and future shared technologies and air power readiness, including the application of AI/ML capabilities.
- Establishing a direct partnership between the Joint Capabilities Group (JCG) and the Canadian Joint Forces Command (CJFC) to collaborate on logistical and sustainment challenges across the RAAF and RCAF, focusing on strengths and opportunities and strategic options.
- Develop, through Joint Operations Command (JOC) and Canadian Joint Operations Command (CJOC), a robust and detailed plan for integration of training, exercises and multi-domain collaboration between RAAF and RCAF to enhance individual and shared lethality.

So What Does This Mean For Us Everyday?

At the tactical level, it means planning, briefing, and training as though we will operate alongside coalition partners with little notice and imperfect information. Shared platforms like the P-8A and aligned C2 concepts only reduce friction if aircrew routinely practise common comms plans, standard defensive reactions, and shared decision-making under pressure. Every day, this partnership should show up in how we write mission plans, conduct simulator scenarios, and run debriefs, deliberately reinforcing interoperability and adaptability. When the air tasking order no longer reflects peacetime assumptions, crews who have trained this way will integrate faster, recover quicker from disruption, and continue operating effectively from austere locations.