

What can Australia learn from the Swedish and Canadian approach to defence?

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Introduction

Australia is a maritime, geographically vast, technologically capable, and globally connected nation. These attributes do not guarantee effective national security, but they do provide choice, and Australia is now under increasing pressure to make the right one.

At the Air and Space Conference 2026, Air Marshal Stephen Chappell, Chief of the Royal Australian Air Force, described Australia as being in a “strategic autumn.” His message was clear: conflict may not be imminent, but it is increasingly plausible, and he emphasised that “autumn is a time for preparedness”. The choices we make now will determine whether Australia enters winter resilient and prepared, or reactive and constrained.

Australia must respond by deliberately building fighting depth to generate more options, in more places, more often, across posture, space, and time. Sweden and Canada offer valuable lessons in agility, innovation, endurance, and connectivity. However, learning alone is not enough. How Australia applies these lessons, and how each of us contributes to building fighting depth, will shape the nation’s ability to defend itself.

Sweden: Agility and Innovation as Warfighting Fundamentals

Sweden’s defence posture shows how a smaller force actively builds fighting depth by design rather than by scale. Sweden prioritises agility and innovation as core warfighting fundamentals. Their experience shows that fighting depth does not depend on numbers alone, but on the ability to disperse forces, endure disruption, mobilise society, and innovate quickly.

The Swedish Air Force adopts a dispersed base concept and designs its forces to operate under attack. They routinely move aircraft between locations within a base and uses separate runways to complicate targeting and disrupt adversary kill chains. Australia uses elements of dispersal and base resilience, but it applies them episodically rather than routinely. Sweden shows that dispersal delivers real advantage only when forces rehearse it regularly, resource it properly, and embed it in daily operations.

Australia would need to continue to invest more in infrastructure, logistics, command and control, and workforce skills to adopt this approach. It would also need to accept greater peacetime complexity. Australia’s size, reliance on a small number of major bases, and efficiency-driven force structure make this shift challenging. Nevertheless, Sweden shows that forces need to generate air power in different ways to survive when fixed bases come under threat.

Sweden also adopts a whole-of-society approach to defence. Its total defence model integrates military forces, civil preparedness, industry, and government to ensure society can protect the population and sustain national defence during crisis or conflict. While Sweden uses conscription, its key lesson lies in its culture of shared responsibility, resilience, and public trust.

Australia must continue to build a similar mindset by clearly explaining the strategic environment, linking defence to national resilience, and giving communities meaningful roles in preparedness. Leaders must build trust through transparency, credible institutions, and sustained investment in civil readiness. While Australians increasingly recognise a deteriorating security environment and express growing concern about future shocks, many also feel underprepared and insufficiently informed, as highlighted in recent Australian National University report on national security attitudes (Medcalf & Wilford, 2026). Addressing this gap through strategic communications, greater transparency and civil-military integration is essential to building fighting depth across both the force and the broader community.

Sweden also treats innovation as combat power. Its long-standing neutral posture drove it to build sovereign capability, support domestic industry, and innovate largely in-house. Sweden designs its systems to be simple to use, resilient under attack, and easy to maintain with minimal logistics. It emphasises speed, learning, and decentralised problem solving.

Australia recognises the importance of innovation but still relies on centralised decision-making, risk-averse processes, and slow acquisition timelines. Australia seeks to empower operators and engineers to experiment, accept calculated risk, and prioritise practical, maintainable solutions over unnecessary complexity. We need to match this intent with action. This shift challenges a system optimised for efficiency and assurance, but without faster pathways from concept to capability, Australia risks falling behind more adaptive adversaries.

Sweden demonstrates that fighting depth comes from how forces operate, how society supports defence, and how quickly ideas become capability. Its approach shows how deliberate peacetime choices can multiply combat power and preserve strategic options under pressure.

Canada: Endurance and Connectivity in a Continental Fight

Canada offers a complementary lesson in building fighting depth through endurance and connectivity across a vast operating environment. Like Australia, it faces immense distances, harsh conditions, and multi-domain challenges. Rather than treating geography as a constraint, Canada uses it as strategic depth.

Australia should adopt the same mindset. Northern Australia underpins force projection, sustainment, and deterrence. Australia should continue investing in northern infrastructure, logistics, fuel resilience, communications, and enabling capabilities that support sustained operations. At the same time, it must avoid concentrating capability in one region. It must distribute forces, stockpiles, and access arrangements across the continent to improve resilience and reduce vulnerability.

Canada also highlights the need to plan for threats from multiple directions. Australia's geography exposes it across extended air, maritime, and southern approaches. The force should adopt flexible basing, broader exercises, and posture options that support operations across the entire operating environment. This approach requires forces to operate routinely from a wider network of locations, including northern and southern bases, civilian airfields, and austere sites. It also requires leaders to distribute fuel, munitions, spares, and support equipment across multiple locations rather than concentrating them at major bases. Exercises should stress long-distance sustainment, contested communications, and multi-regional command and control. Distance, cost, workforce limits, and infrastructure gaps complicate this effort. However, avoiding these challenges would lock Australia into predictable patterns and create single points of failure.

Canada also demonstrates the value of deep partnerships. Arrangements such as NORAD and Five Eyes show how trust, shared awareness, and interoperability expand national capability. Australia must strengthen its alliances through deeper integration, shared planning, regular high-end exercises, and genuine mutual reliance. Partnerships such as Five Eyes and the Quad provide critical access, support, and coordination in contested environments.

Canada shows that fighting depth depends on endurance and connection across distance, domains, and partners. Australia must invest deliberately in both to maintain credible defence options.

Building Australia's Fighting Depth

Australia must now bring these lessons together and use them to build real fighting depth across posture, space, and time, as outlined in Concept ASPECT.

Our **posture** must support sustained operations by strengthening supply chains, improving fuel and munitions resilience, and enabling the force to scale and regenerate when required. This includes developing a larger and more adaptable workforce, strengthening integration with industry, and preparing personnel not only to deploy, but also to endure, recover, and continue operating over time.

Building **depth** in space requires using a wider network of operating locations rather than relying on a small number of main bases. Australia must use northern and southern bases, civilian airfields, and austere locations as part of a connected system that links Defence, industry, and infrastructure. It must expand key airfields, improve access to training airspace, and invest in deployable infrastructure to enable dispersion, unpredictability, and sustained operations. Australia must also deepen relationships with allies and partners, including Five Eyes and the Quad, to maintain access and interoperability when environments become contested.

Time underpins everything. Australia must improve situational awareness, integrate intelligence, and accelerate decision-making. Faster mobilisation, pre-planned access, and rehearsed contingencies will allow the force to act decisively instead of reacting too late.

Together, these measures create options. Those options strengthen deterrence by showing that Australia can respond, adapt, and operate effectively when it matters most. Winter may be inevitable, but unpreparedness is not.

A Personal and Collective Responsibility

Australia must learn from others while adapting lessons to its own context. Sweden highlights agility and innovation. Canada emphasises geography, endurance, and connectivity. They show that people, purpose, and preparedness underpin effective defence.

Turning insight into capability requires actively challenging legacy mindsets that prioritise efficiency over resilience, centralised control over initiative, and certainty over adaptability. Australia must empower leaders at all levels to experiment, accept calculated risk, and learn quickly from failure, while streamlining decision-making and accelerating pathways from concept to capability. This shift demands sustained leadership commitment, cultural change, and incentives that reward innovation and preparedness rather than simply maintaining the status quo.

Building fighting depth is not someone else's responsibility; it belongs to all of us. Whether you are an aviator, senior leader, Defence professional, industry partner, or member of the wider community, your mindset and actions matter. Strategic autumn is already here. The choices we make now will determine whether Australia enters winter constrained and reactive, or resilient, integrated, and ready.

How will you contribute to building Australia's fighting depth?

References

Rory Medcalf, T. W. (2026). *No worries? Australian attitudes to national security, risk and resilience*. Canberra: Australian National University. Retrieved from <https://nsc.anu.edu.au/research/no-worries-australian-attitudes-national-security-risk-and-resilience#section-54140>