



Strategic Report

Canada's Strategic Autonomy in the 21st Century: A Roadmap

Justin Massie and Philippe Lagassé, 2026-09-09



Executive Summary

For the first time in its history, Canada is making strategic autonomy a guiding principle of its defence policy. However, the government has provided neither a concrete definition nor specific targets to assess its achievement, which risks turning it into a rallying cry that is more rhetorical than practical. This study addresses this gap: it defines Canadian strategic autonomy (CSA), identifies its dimensions, the vital interests that underpin it, and the threats that justify it, and then proposes a capabilities- and institutions-based roadmap to achieve it.

CSA is understood here as the ability to conduct military operations with the United States whenever possible, but without American support if necessary. This approach is one of risk mitigation rather than decoupling, and it is broken down into three dimensions: decision-making, operational, and industrial and technological. It constitutes a medium- and long-term objective, with a target horizon of at least 2035–2040.

KEY HIGHLIGHTS

- **Two vital interests:** The defence of Canada's territorial integrity, including the Arctic and critical infrastructure, and that of its allies' territorial integrity, along with the preservation of freedom of navigation for international trade.
- **Three main threats:** Conventional and hybrid threats from Russia, including a possible test of Article 5 within the next three to five years; the end of unwavering American support to European defence, which must become the guiding assumption for planning; and the rise of China, the effects of which would impact Canada even without direct confrontation.
- **Three Key Constraints:** Budgetary: Base defence spending will need to reach \$159.1 billion by 2035–2036, according to the Parliamentary Budget Officer. Capacity: Only 61.3% of force elements are operationally ready, and the CAF faces a shortfall of approximately 16,000 personnel. Policy: Inconsistency between government rhetoric and procurement decisions.
- **Defending Canadian territory:** Securing and maintaining critical and defence infrastructure; cyber defence and counter-drone capabilities; a sovereign command-and-control system complementary to NORAD; space-based surveillance and communications; air and maritime surveillance; and air defence systems procured from non-U.S. suppliers.
- **A mixed fleet of more than 130 combat aircraft:** Complete the acquisition of the 88 F-35s by 2034, then add approximately 50 next-generation aircraft from 2035 onward, acquired through a non-U.S. allied program and paired with collaborative combat drones.

- **A sovereign deep-strike capability:** Allied diversification (JSM missiles, European ELSA program), a sovereign low-cost effector program, delivery systems, and end-to-end control of the targeting chain, in support of the Canadian Deep Precision Strike Capability (CDPSC) project.
- **Defending allies:** Providing attritionable capabilities (ammunition, interceptors, drones) and enablers (expanding the fleet of refueling aircraft to 12 or 15 and the GlobalEye fleet to 8 or 10), supplementing the twelve Type 212CD submarines with autonomous underwater vehicles and the combat aircraft fleet with collaborative combat drones, and building a land-based force of approximately 50,000 military personnel with staggered readiness.
- **Four recommendations:** Develop a new defence policy that explicitly defines vital interests; publish a ten-year investment plan validated by the Parliamentary Budget Officer; increase research and development to at least 3% of the defence budget; and provide structural funding for an independent analytical ecosystem.
- **Risks Taken:** CSA requires a generation of political consistency, exposes Canada to U.S. coercion, which can be managed through transparent and gradual risk mitigation, and opens a window of prolonged vulnerability: command autonomy is achievable within a decade, denial autonomy in fifteen to twenty years, and deep-strike autonomy beyond 2040.

For the first time since 1987, Canada has the financial resources and political will necessary to build credible strategic autonomy. The proposed roadmap aims to turn this ambition into reality before this window closes.

Table of Contents

Executive Summary	1
Introduction.....	5
Strategic Autonomy	6
Defend What, Against Whom?	8
Canada's Vital Interests	8
<i>Secondary Interests</i>	<i>10</i>
The Main Threats to Canada	11
<i>The Russian Conventional Threat and the Risk of Conflict Escalation in Europe</i>	<i>12</i>
<i>The End of Predictable American Support</i>	<i>13</i>
<i>China's Rise.....</i>	<i>15</i>
The Constraints of Strategic Autonomy	17
The Budgetary Constraint.....	17
The Capability Constraint	18
The Political Constraint.....	19
Defending Canada Through Strategic Autonomy	21
Critical Infrastructure	21
Cyberdefence and Anti-Drone Measures	21
Command and Control	22
Space Surveillance and Communications	22
Air Surveillance.....	24
Maritime Surveillance.....	25
Air and Missile Defence	26
Combat Aircraft	29
Deep-Strike Capabilities	31
Defending Allies Through Strategic Autonomy	34
Large-scale precision strikes	34
Interceptors	35
Facilitators	36
Submarine Fleet	37
Divisions.....	38
Recommendations	40
Develop a New Defence Policy	40
Publish a detailed ten-year investment plan.....	40
Funding Research and Development.....	41

Canada’s Strategic Autonomy in the 21st Century: A Roadmap - Strategic Report

Funding an Ecosystem for the CSA41

Risks and Consequences 43

Justin Massie45

Philippe Lagassé45

Bibliographical reference.....45

Introduction

For the first time in its history, Canada is making strategic autonomy a foundational principle of its defence policy. This concept had not been a guiding principle before Prime Minister Carney took office. It now occupies a central place in government communications: the Prime Minister invoked it during his [speech](#) in Davos and [reiterated it](#) before the Economic Club of New York, asserting that a country that cannot defend itself [“is not truly sovereign.”](#) In the same vein, Canada's very first [Defence Industrial Strategy](#) (DIS) calls for the development of “sovereign capabilities” to “maximize Canada's strategic autonomy” (hereinafter referred to as Canadian strategic autonomy, or CSA).

However, despite the central role it assigns to this concept, the Canadian government has provided neither a concrete definition nor specific targets to assess its achievement. The cardinal principle guiding Canadian defence policy therefore remains vague. Its multiple meanings create confusion: some interpret it as a desire to [break away](#) from the United States, while others see it instead as an attempt to increase the [resilience](#) of the Canadian economy. On the military front, the SID sets only one [target](#): maintaining operational capability, with the goal of increasing the readiness of the air, naval, and land forces. In the absence of clear objectives, there is a high risk that strategic autonomy will become a rallying political slogan, but one that is of little practical use in guiding the Canadian Armed Forces' (CAF) capability decisions.

This study aims to fill that gap. It seeks to define the concept of Canadian strategic autonomy, identify its key dimensions and national security objectives, and develop a roadmap illustrating what an autonomous defence policy for Canada might look like. This effort is all the more timely given that the Carney administration is working to develop a new defence policy designed to shape Canada's military priorities for the coming decade. Clarifying what CSA means, what it entails in practical terms, and the trade-offs it involves appears essential to informing the design of this future policy. Such clarification is also necessary to assess the consistency between Ottawa's stated ambitions and the resources actually allocated to achieve them. Decisions regarding the composition of a potential mixed fighter fleet, the renewal of submarine capabilities, the development of autonomous systems, and the strengthening of the defence industrial and technological base (DITB) all raise fundamental questions about the degree of autonomy Canada is truly seeking to achieve. By clarifying what the CSA would look like, this study will thus make it possible to evaluate Canada's capability choices in light of the Canadian government's political ambitions.

Strategic Autonomy

Strategic autonomy is a concept commonly used in defence debates in Europe, but it remains poorly defined. The European Union (EU) defines it as the “ability to act autonomously when necessary and with partners whenever possible.” In the area of defence, the EU's Global Strategy for Foreign and Security Policy sets out the objective of being able “to deter, respond to, and protect ourselves against external threats.”

However, there is no common understanding of what strategic autonomy means in practice. Rather than a binary choice, it is measured on a spectrum ranging from structural dependence to complete emancipation from the United States. From the perspective of Western allies, it is indeed primarily in relation to Washington that dependence and the need to gain autonomy to confront external threats manifest themselves. The allies must guard against the possibility of U.S. disengagement from their security and against an American strategy of exploiting their technological and industrial dependence to force alignment with Washington.

Three main dimensions characterize strategic autonomy. The first is decision-making: the ability to independently deliberate and decide on the country's strategic direction and the circumstances surrounding the use of force. In this regard, Canada falls short. Its high-level defence strategy has historically been outsourced to larger allies, with Ottawa content to contribute to allied operations without seeking to achieve its own strategic objectives. Canada's well-known difficulty in clearly articulating its national interests, the threats to those interests, and the means necessary to address them stems from the absence of a culture of strategic autonomy within the country.

The second dimension is operational: the ability to prepare, launch, and conduct multi-domain military operations without relying on the United States in priority areas of interest. In this regard as well, Canada has a long way to go. Its force structure is designed to be “plug-and-play” with the U.S. Armed Forces, whether for the defence of the North American continent or for expeditionary operations. Aside from operations to assist civilian authorities on Canadian territory (flood management, wildfire suppression, etc.), search-and-rescue missions, and maritime patrols, the CAF is primarily structured to operate alongside American forces, both to defend the territory against external aggression and to participate in overseas operations.

The third dimension is industrial and technological: the ability to produce, maintain, and replenish the resources essential to the deployment of the armed forces without relying on the United States. This does not mean producing everything in a self-sufficient manner, nor does it mean cutting off all forms of industrial and military cooperation with the United States, but rather building resilient and redundant supply chains to reduce structural dependence. In other words, the goal is to practice “hedging” or risk mitigation rather than “decoupling”: maintaining

interoperability with the United States while building parallel capabilities capable of ensuring the continuation of operations even in the event of capability denials or interference by Washington. The goal is to be able to conduct military operations with the United States as a matter of course, but without U.S. support if necessary. In this regard, Canada falls short: its DITB is largely intertwined with that of the United States, which is why Prime Minister Carney seeks to move “from dependence to resilience” by diversifying Canadian military acquisitions and developing sovereign capabilities.

Defend What, Against Whom?

Any roadmap toward strategic autonomy requires a precise definition of the threats against which it is intended to defend. Defining these threats involves answering three central questions: against whom must Canada defend itself, under what circumstances, and to achieve what objectives? Without clear answers to these questions, the accumulation of military capabilities results in a catalog of equipment and a doctrine of use rather than a military strategy. To increase strategic autonomy, it is therefore necessary to outline the threats that justify procurement decisions, operational commitments, and the allocation of resources in the manner most conducive to defending vital interests.

Canada's Vital Interests

Canada has two vital interests that are non-negotiable. The first is the defence of Canada's territorial integrity. This is understood not in the narrow sense of resisting a conventional invasion, the likelihood of which remains very low, but in the broader sense of the ability to detect, deter, and, if necessary, counter challenges to Canadian sovereignty over its territory, its maritime approaches, and its airspace, including in the Arctic, which accounts for 40 percent of Canada's land area and more than 70 percent of its coastline. This includes protecting critical infrastructure against hybrid forms of aggression such as cyberattacks, sabotage of undersea cables, or unclaimed incursions by autonomous systems into Canada's internal waters (including the Northwest Passage) and its exclusive economic zone, as well as the ability to provide essential services to the population in the event of a national crisis.

One might argue that the defence of North America, rather than that of Canadian territory alone, should be prioritized. This would overlook the fact that the United States remains, by far, the world's leading military power. Even amid heightened rivalry with China, Washington possesses unparalleled military, industrial, and technological resources to ensure the defence of North American territory. In the event of a major attack on North America, such as a cruise missile strike, it is unlikely that the United States would need significant Canadian assistance to defend its own territory.

The 2026 National Defence Strategy (NDS), on the other hand, suggests that Washington would find it more useful for Canada to first and foremost assume full responsibility for the protection of its own territory and the North American approaches. By making the defence of American territory the organizing principle of U.S. military strategy, it states that allies "will assume primary responsibility for their own defence, with critical but more limited support from U.S. forces." The NDS reserves its highest regard for "model allies," that is, those doing more to counter threats in

their region, particularly through NORAD for threats from the north, thereby freeing up American capabilities for the defence of U.S. territory and the Indo-Pacific theater.

Given the vastness of Canada's territory and the assets that need to be protected, Ottawa must prioritize the protection of critical defence assets, that is, the capabilities and infrastructures most essential to preserving strategic autonomy: command posts, communications centers, military bases, major platforms, critical energy networks, transportation networks, and production and supply capabilities. Defending population centers is a second priority. Canada must decide on the level of risk it is willing to accept here, since defending all population centers against all forms of threats is unrealistic. A clear and pre-established division of responsibilities among the various security forces is also necessary to ensure coordinated crisis management. Only threats requiring a military response (armed aggression, terrorism, acts of sabotage, etc.) should be entrusted to the CAF; all others fall under the purview of police forces, intelligence services, or civilian emergency management organizations, namely Public Safety Canada, the provincial emergency management agencies, and non-governmental partners such as the Canadian Red Cross. This division does not preclude using the CAF as a 'force of last resort' in support of civilian authorities when the scale of a natural disaster or an internal security crisis exceeds provincial and municipal capacities (e.g., floods, wildfires, public health emergencies). However, it requires that this role remain what it is intended to be: an emergency measure, not a permanent stopgap for underinvestment in civilian response capabilities. This approach is needed to properly scope the CAF's role within Canadian territory, preserve its operational readiness for its primary missions, and prevent it from being deployed inappropriately. Consequently, the federal government, in consultation with provincial governments, should ensure that it has other non-military means to respond to crises that fall below the threshold for deploying the CAF.

Canada's second vital interest is the defence of its allies' territorial integrity. This interest is essential for preserving the Alliance's credibility and Canada's obligations within it. If Russia were to attack a European ally without a credible response, NATO's deterrence capability would be called into question, which would encourage further aggression and jeopardize the very existence of the Alliance. As a founding member of NATO, Canada had a vested interest in establishing the Atlantic Alliance and then in helping to preserve it through the many crises it has faced. This involves protecting populations, democratic values, standards of sovereignty, and European stability by countering Russia's coercive actions, as well as preventing a broader and more costly war. Indeed, the failure of deterrence in Eastern Europe would increase the risk of military escalation elsewhere on the continent and would require even larger and more costly military deployments to ensure the protection of the rest of the continent. Similarly, a Russian military victory in Ukraine would entail higher costs for Europe's defence than the value of the support provided to Kyiv to resist Russian imperialism.

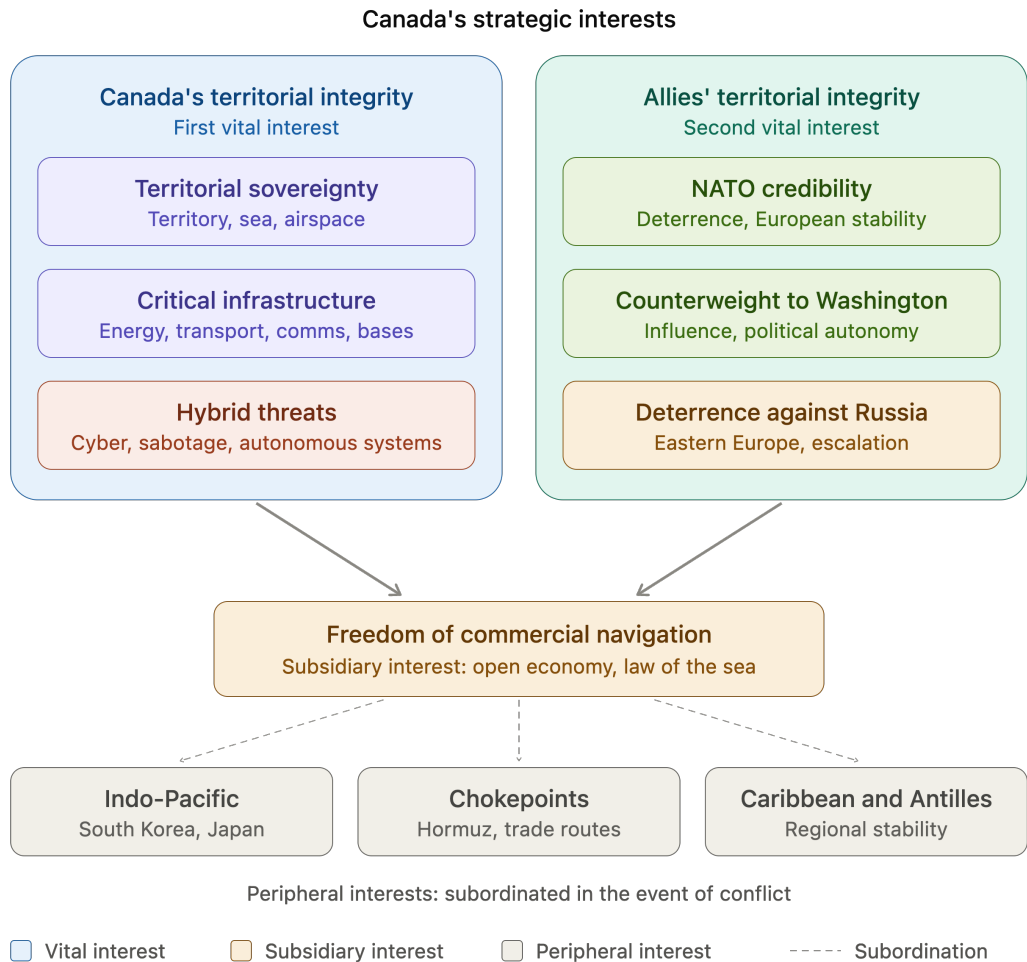
Finally, the North Atlantic Alliance allows Canada to exert some influence over its allies' decision-making and to preserve a degree of political autonomy from the United States by maintaining a European counterweight. Otherwise, Canada's defence policy could be confined to North America and governed exclusively by its asymmetrical relationship with Washington. A strong and free Europe therefore serves Canada's vital interests.

Secondary Interests

Canada's secondary interests include the preservation of freedom of navigation for international trade. As an open economy whose prosperity depends on access to global markets, Canada has a direct interest in maintaining a maritime order based on the law, as enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, against any attempt by a revisionist power to unilaterally restrict access to it. Freedom of navigation to Canada's major trading partners beyond the United States (Europe, the United Kingdom, China, and Japan), as well as the stability of key chokepoints in international trade, such as the Strait of Hormuz, where disruption has global repercussions, are essential to Canada's prosperity.

Defending Canada's territorial integrity and freedom of navigation for trade go hand in hand. The surveillance and interdiction capabilities required to protect Canadian sovereignty in its internal waters and in strategic sea lanes shared with its allies (the Atlantic, Pacific, and Arctic Oceans) are interchangeable. They can equally contribute to the defence of strategic sea lanes alongside allies in peacetime, as evidenced by the regular deployment of a Canadian frigate in the Taiwan Strait. However, in times of conflict, it would be necessary to prioritize the protection of sea lanes critical to Canadian sovereignty and the reinforcement of European allies over other areas of operation.

Similarly, the naval and air capabilities required to defend Canada's allies could also be used to defend its strategic partners, including South Korea and Japan, should their territorial integrity be threatened. But the possibility of a two-front war—in the Indo-Pacific against China, and in Europe and the Arctic against Russia—requires prioritizing Canadian territory first, followed by European territory, as the primary theaters of operations for the CAF, due to Canada's alliance commitments and the forward deployment of Canadian military personnel. The same applies to other potential areas of operation, such as the Caribbean and larger Western Hemisphere: although a contribution to international stability efforts in these regions might be considered in peacetime, it would be secondary to the requirements of protecting Canada's vital interests in the event of a conflict.



The Main Threats to Canada

Mapping threats forms the basis of any credible strategy, any coherent capability acquisition plan, any force posture that can be justified to the Canadian public, and just as importantly, the trade-offs that must be made when undertaking each of these efforts. Indeed, any strategy requires prioritizing certain capabilities at the expense of others, given limited resources. The clearest example for Canada lies in its choice not to develop nuclear capabilities. However, these choices have rarely been made transparently or based on an explicit articulation of priorities in light of the main threats facing Canada. We identify three main threats to Canada's national interests in the foreseeable future, to provide specific insight into the CAF's capability priorities.

The Russian Conventional Threat and the Risk of Conflict Escalation in Europe

Russia's war of aggression against Ukraine represents the most significant factor influencing Canadian defence policy since the Cold War. Two related scenarios warrant particular attention. The first is the horizontal expansion of the war. If the Russia-Ukraine front were to stabilize, whether through a negotiated ceasefire or the exhaustion of both belligerents leading to a frozen conflict, Russia could target a NATO member deemed less defensible. Several scenarios of aggression are conceivable, particularly against the [Baltic states](#), the [northern flank](#), the [Suwalki Gap](#), and the [seabed](#) of the Atlantic Ocean. The [intelligence services](#) of certain European countries, the German [Minister of Defence](#) and [Chief of the General Staff](#), as well as numerous [analyses](#), consider it likely that Russia will attempt to test NATO's Article 5 over the next three to five years through repeated provocations against Western allies, which could lead to a direct military confrontation.

The second scenario involves an escalation of the hybrid war that Russia is already waging against its allies. This campaign takes a wide range of forms: cyberattacks against critical infrastructure and government networks, information manipulation and interference in democratic processes, sabotage of undersea cables and pipelines, incursions by autonomous systems into allied airspace and waters, espionage and subversion operations, and even acts of physical [sabotage](#) on European soil. Far from being isolated, these actions are part of a cumulative pattern: they [have intensified](#) since the start of the invasion of Ukraine and could lead to an escalation.

The defining characteristic of these aggressions is that they deliberately remain below the threshold of armed conflict. Nevertheless, they carry the potential to escalate into a direct confrontation through at least three interrelated mechanisms. The first stems from the cumulative logic of provocation: the Kremlin must continually intensify its probing actions to secure gains, so that each new incursion increases the risk of miscalculation and narrows the window for crisis management, which could transform a limited incident into a conventional war that Moscow nevertheless wishes to avoid. The scale of this "[paradox of escalation](#)" is evidenced by the [151](#) confirmed [incidents](#) of Russian-origin industrial sabotage in Europe between February 2022 and February 2026.

A related issue is the dilemma of retaliation. A lack of response erodes norms, while an excessive response risks unintended escalation. This is a dilemma that Russia deliberately exploits, since allied restraint is interpreted as strategic weakness, whereas a kinetic response allows Moscow to portray NATO as the aggressor. However, this dilemma is becoming increasingly unstable as frontline states harden their stances, notably by considering [changes to the rules of engagement](#) governing the interception of Russian drones and aircraft to allow for more forceful responses.

The third mechanism concerns a possible transition out of the gray zone itself: some analyses suggest that Russia could cross the threshold into low-intensity conventional provocations. Possible scenarios include widespread sabotage campaigns, the assassination of European political leaders, an escalation along the Polish-Belarusian border, swarms of drones, or in the most severe scenario, a limited ground incursion that could force a member state to invoke Article 5.

In short, the danger of a direct confrontation lies as much in a deliberate decision by the Kremlin to go to war as in the interactive dynamics inherent in the gray zone. The normalization of Russian provocations, combined with the gradual lowering of allied response thresholds, creates the conditions for a chain reaction in which a misattributed or misinterpreted incident, such as an aerial collision, a drone shot down over disputed territory, or sabotage causing civilian casualties, could trigger a spiral of action and reaction that spirals out of control for both sides.

Canada would not be spared in such scenarios. While it faces no risk of invasion, it could likely be targeted in a conflict between Russia and NATO in one of two ways. The first would be a warning shot: striking Canadian targets would allow Moscow to demonstrate North America's vulnerability without directly targeting the United States, whose retaliation would be certain. The second would stem from a Canadian contribution to the defence of Europe, which would expose the country to cruise missile strikes launched from its Arctic approaches, as well as to sabotage and interference operations on its territory. Canada would be neither a primary target nor a main theater of operations, but it would be naïve to believe that it would escape hostilities if it were a party to a conflict against Russia. This prospect reinforces the priority given in this roadmap to the aerospace defence of the territory and the protection of critical infrastructure.

The End of Predictable American Support

These threats arise in a context where allies can no longer take the unwavering support of the United States for granted. The Trump administration is undertaking a recalibration that several of its predecessors had contemplated but chose not to pursue: pushing Europeans to take up the primary responsibility for the defence of their continent. Washington is thus seeking to refocus its attention and resources on the Chinese threat, judging itself incapable of simultaneously sustaining two direct confrontations, one in the Indo-Pacific against China, the other in Europe against Russia. Priority is therefore being given to the Indo-Pacific theater, in addition to the Western Hemisphere. It is with this in mind that NATO is revising its regional defence plans to account for the withdrawal of American strategic capabilities.

The Alliance is thus embarking on its "Europeanization," laying the groundwork for what is being termed NATO 3.0. Three scenarios emerge from this transfer of responsibility within the Alliance. The first is that of a coordinated division of labor, which sees Washington focused on the Chinese threat and Europe on the Russian threat. This scenario is already starting to take shape. The

second is a partial break, in which the United States retains its formal membership in NATO while refusing to contribute militarily in the event of external aggression. The revision of the United States' overall defence posture has, in fact, led to a [reduction in U.S. capabilities](#) made available to NATO in the event of a confrontation with Russia.

The third scenario is that of a complete break, marked by a formal American withdrawal from the NATO. Its likelihood remains low, if only because of the American institutional safeguards: Congress has enshrined in law the requirement for legislative approval prior to any withdrawal from the Washington Treaty, and lawmakers from both parties, including prominent Republicans, have included provisions in [the 2027 National Defence Authorization Act](#) designed to prevent further troop reductions, even as the Russian threat shows no signs of abating. But the low likelihood of a formal break should not be a cause for reassurance, for two reasons. On the one hand, this scenario does not need to materialize to have an impact: a de facto disengagement, such as the gradual withdrawal of critical capabilities, making U.S. support contingent on allies' spending, or deliberate ambiguity regarding commitments under Article 5, would be enough to strip the American security guarantee of its deterrent value. Second, a good insurance policy involves preparing for scenarios that are low probability but high impact. Since the credibility of deterrence rests on the adversary's perception of it, the mere doubt harbored in Moscow regarding the reliability of an American commitment undermines NATO collective defence posture, whether that doubt is well-founded or not.

The American threat, however, is not limited to disengagement. Under the second Trump administration, the United States has transformed into a [“predatory hegemon,”](#) to use Stephen Walt's term, which is disrupting the existing international order and posing a plausible threat to Canadian sovereignty itself. President Trump's repeated allusions to Canada as the 51st state, his stated desire to take control of Greenland, and the November 2025 National Security Strategy, which establishes the restoration of U.S. pre-eminence in the Western Hemisphere as a “Trump corollary” to the Monroe Doctrine, cannot be simply dismissed as mere provocations. The rationale Trump has cited regarding his desire to control Greenland, namely, Denmark's alleged inability to defend the territory against Russia and China, could be applied to Canada. A poorly contained domestic emergency, such as an attack on shared critical infrastructure, a major natural disaster, or a security issue designated by Washington, would provide the United States with a pretext to deploy forces on Canadian soil, forces that might never leave; indeed, Republican lawmakers have cited Canada's handling of the summer 2026 wildfires to suggest such an intervention. This dilemma, theorized by Nils Orvik under the term “defence against help” requires that Canada be capable of managing crises occurring on its territory on its own; otherwise, it risks unsolicited American help that could erode its sovereignty.

Added to this territorial threat is the more insidious threat of vassalization. In the military sphere, this would see Washington dictating, even subtly, Canadian defence policy to Ottawa, such as

what capabilities are acquired for the CAF, the missions it prioritizes, and the operations and deployments it may undertake. Canada would retain the appearance of an independent defence policy while, in reality, being subject to American decisions. However, acquiring American equipment by default and structuring the CAF for seamless integration with U.S. forces makes this vassalage more likely: upgrades, mission data, and spare parts could be withheld to punish Canada or influence its decisions, and Ottawa could find itself prevented from conducting operations essential to its sovereignty. An American refusal to integrate, accommodate, or grant Canada full control of sovereign capabilities would, moreover, signal that the continental defence relationship is shifting toward one of subordination rather than partnership. It is precisely this risk that the CSA aims to avert: contributing to the defence of North America through capabilities that Canada controls and can deploy without American permission.

China's Rise

China poses a threat of a different nature. Its assertive stance in the South China Sea and its de facto alliance with Russia creates strategic dynamics that could affect Canada even in the absence of direct confrontation between Ottawa and Beijing. Four potential impacts are worth highlighting.

The first one is indirect: if the United States becomes involved in a conflict over Taiwan, it will likely redeploy assets from North American and the Atlantic theater, leaving Canada to shoulder a greater share of the continental and collective defence burdens. This scenario has become a serious planning factor since the Trump administration has explicitly made its commitment to Europe contingent on a refocusing toward the Chinese threat. However, the scale and duration of this redeployment would likely be far greater than what short, decisive war scenarios suggest. According to [many](#), a Sino-American conflict would most likely last longer than traditional force planning scenarios anticipate. Neither side possesses the overwhelming conventional superiority or economic advantage necessary for a quick victory. Several scenarios for a protracted war must therefore be considered, ranging from a blockade of Taiwan to a proxy war. Analyses by [the CSIS](#) reinforce this assessment: in repeated war simulations, the U.S. military exhausts its stockpile of certain long-range missiles within the first week of a Taiwan conflict, production lead times for critical munitions stretch to three to four years, and the ability to deter or fight simultaneously on two fronts, in the Indo-Pacific and Europe, proves even more problematic. A protracted conflict over Taiwan would therefore not result in a temporary U.S. absence from Europe, but rather in a lasting reorientation of U.S. capabilities, ammunition stocks, and industrial focus, precisely at a time when the Russian threat is increasing.

The second factor concerns North American territory itself. The idea that a war with China would remain confined to the Indo-Pacific is, according to an analysis by [the Modern War Institute](#) at West Point, dangerous wishful thinking. Beijing would seek to avoid a direct conventional strike

that could cross the nuclear threshold, which would favor a campaign of hybrid warfare against North American, including the physical sabotage of critical infrastructure (ports, oil pipelines, power grids, communication cables), the disruption of civil aviation by drones, cyberattacks against essential services, the use of criminal proxies, and the manipulation of the information environment. Canada, whose energy, port, and transportation infrastructures are deeply integrated with that of the United States and whose territory is home to facilities essential to NORAD, would be exposed to the hybrid threats, whether as a direct target or as a vulnerable continental link to the United States. This prospect reinforces the priority, established above, placed on protecting critical defence assets on Canadian territory.

The third vector is economic and systemic. As retired General Charles Hooper, one of the Pentagon's leading strategists on China, summarizes, there are no regional wars in the 21st century: all wars are global. Approximately 30 percent of global trade passes through the straits connecting the Indian Ocean to the South China Sea, and any conflict, even a limited one, would block access to them. Estimates cited in the same analysis put the cost of a large-scale Sino-American conflict over Taiwan at around 10 trillion dollars, or about 10 percent of global GDP; a one-year blockade alone would reduce global GDP by 5% and American GDP by 3%. For an open economy like Canada's, whose prosperity depends on freedom of navigation and access to global and continental markets, the impact would be significant regardless of any Canadian military involvement.

The fourth factor is direct economic coercion. Canada's dependence on Chinese rare earths, semiconductors, and military equipment supply chains creates levers of influence that Beijing has already used against other allies. A credible CSA requires that these critical dependencies be reduced, which is precisely what the DIS outlines in its sovereign investment priorities.

The Constraints of Strategic Autonomy

For Canada, each of these threats demands the same approach: prioritizing continental defence, followed by the defence of Europe, and then the defence of Indo-Pacific partners, while developing its strategic autonomy within the limits of its capabilities. Three fundamental constraints will limit the attainment of these goals.

The Budgetary Constraint

The most fundamental constraint is budgetary. Canada had committed to reaching 2% of GDP by 2032, nearly two decades after the formal commitment made at the Wales Summit in 2014. In 2024, it was still allocating only about 1.4% of its GDP to defence, ranking among the lowest in the Alliance, before crossing the 2% threshold during the 2025–2026 fiscal year. By comparison, Poland allocated nearly 4.5% of its GDP to defence that same year, the highest level in NATO.

The 2025 Budget proposed \$81.8 billion over five years to rebuild and rearm the CAF, increasing annual spending from approximately \$41 billion in 2024–2025 to \$68.4 billion in 2028–2029 (with the department's budget confirmed at 51.7 billion for fiscal year 2026–2027). The effort required, however, remains considerable: in line with the 5% of GDP target adopted at the Hague summit in June 2025, of which 3.5% is for direct military capabilities, the Parliamentary Budget Officer estimates that core defence spending will need to reach \$159.1 billion in 2035–2036, representing an additional average of nearly \$33.5 billion per year over the next decade.

Beyond this overall spending trajectory, the internal structure of the defence budget poses an equally complex challenge. The defence budget has proven remarkably resistant to change, even during periods of budgetary expansion: since the end of the Cold War, approximately 40 to 50 percent of spending has gone to personnel, 30 to 40 percent to operations and maintenance, and less than 20 percent to capital expenditures. During the rearmament of the 1980s, the last period in which Canada allocated 2% of its GDP to defence, the share of spending on equipment rose only from 17.8% to 19.7%. Yet it is precisely capital expenditures that fund the military of the future, and thus strategic autonomy. Even assuming a budget of \$150 billion in 2035 and an increase in the share of capital expenditures to 20–25%, equipment spending would reach approximately \$30 billion per year, just under double the roughly \$14 billion projected for 2025–2026. This would be a real improvement, but one largely focused on replacing fleets and infrastructure that have been neglected for decades.

Three other factors add to the uncertainties surrounding the budget. First, funding for the 3.5% target is neither planned nor budgeted: only the trajectory toward 2.5% of GDP by 2030 (approximately \$75 billion in base military spending, compared to the \$105 billion that the 3.5% target would require) appears to be set, with NATO scheduled to review the target in 2029.

Second, the Defence Capabilities Blueprint, updated in May 2026, reveals a remarkably slim acquisition portfolio beyond the short-term: of the 130 unique projects listed therein, 94 are scheduled to reach initial delivery by the end of fiscal year 2026–2027, compared to 21 between 2027–2028 and 2029–2030, and only 12 in 2030–2031 or beyond, with three others lacking a confirmed timeline. The announced spending increases therefore do not yet appear to have been translated into specific projects. Third, the scale of the planned acquisitions, including a number of new aircraft fleets, twelve submarines, and the construction of fifteen combat ships, may well require more than the 2.5% currently planned. Achieving the CSA will therefore involve difficult choices, including sacrifices in capabilities, especially since the desire to promote the development of the Canadian defence industrial base risks increasing acquisition costs.

The Capability Constraint

Capacity is a second constraint. Canada faces a harsh reality: armed forces caught in a “vicious cycle” fueled by personnel shortages, declining operational capabilities, and past decades of neglect. Faced with missed readiness targets, the Department of National Defence has systematically responded not by closing the gap, but by shifting the targets, pushing their deadlines back from 2026 to 2032, and then to 2036. This lack of preparedness has thus been institutionalized within the very governance of Canadian defence.

The government's own performance data supports this assessment. In 2024–2025, only 61.3% of CAF force elements were ready for operations in accordance with established targets, and the capacity to execute all simultaneous missions prescribed by defence policy stood at only 30%, compared to a target of at least 90%. Technical readiness rates tell the same story: 42.3% of key aerospace fleets, 51% of land fleets, and 59.6% of maritime fleets were serviceable. Personnel represent the most pressing constraint: in 2024, the CAF faced a shortfall of approximately 16,000 members, nearly 15% of its authorized strength, and 69% of military occupational groups experienced critical shortages, compared to a maximum target of 5%. Even units that are nominally at full strength often rely on personnel performing dual duties, those medically unavailable, or those diverted to training programs: while administratively present, they are functionally unprepared for crisis response.

The strain extends to mobilization. The war in Ukraine has demonstrated that contemporary interstate conflicts consume ammunition, missiles, platforms, and personnel at rates that no peacetime establishment can sustain without extensive industrial mobilization, a lesson that Canada has been slow to internalize. Recent institutional responses to this challenge are notable: the Canadian Army's *Inflection Point 2025* restructuring creates a Canadian Defence Division dedicated to territorial defence, and a May 2025 directive outlined planning for an expansion of the Primary Reserve from approximately 23,500 to 100,000 members, a level not seen since the Second World War. But the obstacles are just as significant: internal departmental assessments

acknowledge that supply chains, inventories, and training systems are already at full capacity, and no dedicated funding has yet been allocated for this expansion.

This constraint has three implications for the CSA. First, Canada cannot divest itself U.S. capabilities in the short term without further weakening itself; abandoning these capabilities would make Canada even more vulnerable. The CSA is therefore a medium- and long-term objective, with a target date of at least 2035–2040. Second, every dollar spent must contribute either to filling a capability gap or to building a sovereign industrial base, and ideally both. Finally, and most importantly, since institutionalized unpreparedness has never been primarily a problem of money, but rather a problem of incentives, accountability, and strategic culture, increased spending risks funding a larger version of the same dysfunction. The CSA must therefore be accompanied by sustained procurement reform and significant investment in human capital

The Political Constraint

The DIS has a central paradox: while Prime Minister Carney declared that the era of close cooperation with Washington was “over,” the recapitalization of the CAF that has been underway since 2017 is largely based on the acquisition of American capabilities. The inconsistency between the government’s rhetoric and the reality of its procurements is a notable constraint.

Achieving the CSA will require prioritizing capabilities that are essential for the Canadian national interests outlined above. In practical terms, three categories of investment must take precedence. The first are capabilities that promote autonomy, such as building up stockpiles of ammunition, missiles, spare parts to support prolonged operations, and developing a resilient defence industrial base capable of producing, maintaining, and replenishing the assets deployed. Second, joint procurements with reliable, non-American allies, of technologically advanced capabilities that reduce Canada’s vulnerability to possible coercion from Washington. Finally, priority should be given to capabilities that would be needed to defend allies in Europe and the Indo-Pacific in the context of U.S. disengagement.

Two compromises are also required. First, military spending cannot be used as a tool for job creation above all. Ottawa has long been tempted to subordinate procurement to short-term political and regional economic considerations. However, every dollar allocated to defence based on electoral gains rather than operational requirements is a dollar that risks weakening Canada’s defence posture while giving the illusion of strengthening it. Industrial and technological benefits are a legitimate and important objective of the DIS, but they must result from strategically sound capability choices, not precede them.

The second compromise is this: when Canada acquires American capabilities or technologies, which it will have to do in cases where the American capability or technology is simply far more

capable or developed than the alternatives, such as in the digital domain, it should ensure that these capabilities can be operated and controlled without U.S. support in the event of a conflict. Technological superiority and speed of delivery will not be advantages if a capability depends on Washington's goodwill for its use. Finally, we must not mistake a Canadian presence with Canadian control. A capability is not sovereign if the United States is able to deny its use.

This political constraint also presents an opportunity, though. Canada's projected level of defence spending creates the conditions for an industrial policy that serves capability rather than employment: one that builds the domestic capacity to produce, sustain, and replenish what the CAF deploys, and whose economic benefits follow from sound capability choices rather than drive them.

Defending Canada Through Strategic Autonomy

Fiscal and industrial flexibility will remain limited between now and 2035 due to the scale of the catch-up required. Prioritizing investments in territorial defence is therefore necessary and must be organized based on a clear assessment of threats. Defending Canadian territory through strategic autonomy requires the following priorities.

Critical Infrastructure

The top priority should be building and maintaining capabilities that can be used to defend all of Canada. This priority may seem modest in light of current capability ambitions, but it underpins all others. Maintaining these assets involves upgrading the real estate portfolio and operational infrastructure, including runways, airfields, and port facilities capable of accommodating new platforms, as well as suitable hangars, fuel and ammunition depots, and hardened electrical and communications networks. Much of this infrastructure, a legacy of the Cold War, is outdated or inadequate to meet the requirements of the incoming systems. For example, the F-35s require specialized facilities whose construction, according to the [Auditor General](#), is more than three years behind schedule, to the point of jeopardizing the fleet's own entry-into-service timeline.

Cyberdefence and Anti-Drone Measures

The second priority concerns defence against threats below the threshold of open conflict. Denial-based deterrence against low-intensity attacks, such as cyberattacks, sabotage of critical infrastructure, and incursions by unclaimed autonomous systems, is paramount for two reasons that stem directly from the threat assessment outlined above. The first is empirical: this is the most likely, and already the most frequent, form of aggression we are experiencing. The numerous incidents of Russian-backed sabotage in Europe demonstrate that the gray zone is a current theater of operations. Canadian territory, with its undersea cables, pipelines, power grids, ports, and other critical infrastructure, presents a considerable surface area that adversaries could target. The second reason relates to the fragility of U.S. support against these threats: the protection of Canadian territory against sabotage and incursions is not covered by any alliance guarantee (NORAD provides aerospace and maritime warning, not the protection of critical infrastructure), and the U.S. administration has shown little support for allies affected by Russian acts of intimidation. Below the threshold, Canada is left to fend for itself by default, making it all the more imperative to organize accordingly.

Two major investment initiatives stem from this second priority. The first is cyberdefence. The 2025 Budget allocates nearly \$11 billion to digital defence, but the funding will not be sufficient without stronger critical infrastructure resilience strategy, including an explicit division of responsibilities between the Communications Security Establishment, CAF, and the owners and operators of critical, along with a nationwide incident response capability, hardening of military networks in degraded environments, and the development of a credible offensive cyber-capability (because denial itself is more effective when backed by the demonstration that an attacker faces costs within its own digital space.) Post-quantum cryptography, identified by the DIS as a sovereign capability, is essential to the long-term resilience of the entire system.

The second priority is counter-drone operations, which currently represent the most glaring gap in Canada's territorial defence. The ongoing wars in Europe and the Middle East show that expensive interceptors are quickly exhausted by drones that cost a few thousand dollars. The appropriate response to this threat is a layered architecture, which involves detection via radar, passive sensors, and acoustic sensors; neutralization through electronic warfare, jamming, decoys, and low-cost kinetic interception as a last resort. This effort also has significant industrial benefits, since counter-drone operations rely on technologies, such as sensors, data fusion software, and low-cost effectors, where Canadian small and medium enterprises can quickly establish a foothold, and allied requirements offer a potential export market. In this regard, the launch of the Department of National Defence's [drone initiative](#) is to be commended, but it must be part of a truly autonomous architecture.

Command and Control

The third capability imperative for the territorial CSA is the development of a parallel and sovereign command system to complement NORAD. This system must be interoperable with the United States as long as the alliance remains functional, but capable of operating independently should it cease to function. This requires autonomous communication networks and command-and-control structures. This must be carried out in close collaboration with other Five Eyes and European allies to overcome the lack of command and control structures independent of the United States. Building this system will also advance the Europeanization and "Canadianization" of NATO's command structures, as well as inspire the development of redundant systems in the Indo-Pacific.

Space Surveillance and Communications

Space surveillance is also an essential prerequisite for the CSA. Without sovereign intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance satellites, Canada cannot detect emerging threats in its maritime and Arctic approaches, contribute autonomously to precision targeting, or ensure the continuity of its military communications in the event of a disruption to American networks.

Canada has a recognized space industrial base, including the RADARSAT Constellation Mission (RCM), the Sapphire satellite (whose successor, the Surveillance of Space 2 project, is in the definition phase with the first delivery of the scheduled for 2026–2027), and the Polar Epsilon project. However, gaps remain with regard to the CSA. Canada has neither high-resolution optical imaging satellites for sovereign military use, nor, to date, independent secure military communications satellites, nor electronic surveillance (SIGINT) systems in orbit. The secure military SATCOM projects included in [the Defence Capabilities Program](#) are, moreover, part of U.S.-led allied architectures, with initial deliveries scheduled to begin in 2027–2028. In December 2025, the Canadian Space Agency awarded a contract to MDA Space, C-CORE, and Kepler for concept studies of the next-generation satellite system. This is a first step in the right direction, but it remains insufficient given the operational needs of a credible CSA.

The communications component deserves separate consideration in this regard, as it is the area where dependence is both the most complete and the least visible. The three pillars of the CAF's satellite communications are, in fact, U.S. systems to which Canada has access through financial contributions and a memorandum of understanding. Secure, jamming-resistant links rely on the Advanced Extremely High Frequency (AEHF) constellation, access to which is guaranteed by a 1999 agreement; the [Canadian Secure Military Telecommunications Project](#) plans to deliver the terminals in 2028–2029. Broadband communications are provided by Wideband Global SATCOM, which Canada joined by contributing [\\$340 million](#) toward the WGS-9 satellite in exchange for usage rights and three ground stations in the country. Finally, narrowband tactical communications rely on the MUOS constellation, for which the CAF achieved [initial operational capability](#) by the end of 2024. In all three cases, Canada pays for usage rights, not control; availability, user prioritization, and, ultimately, the possibility of a denial of service are all determined by Washington. Added to this is a physical constraint specific to Canada: geostationary satellites, positioned above the equator, do not reliably serve mobile platforms beyond approximately 70 degrees north, precisely where the sovereignty that these communications are intended to support is exercised.

The [contract awarded on August 4, 2026](#), by the Defence Investment Agency to Telesat is, in this regard, the decision most consistent with the CSA's rationale to date. With a budget of 2.7 billion over fifteen years, it implements the Enhanced Satellite Communications Project—Polar (PCSA-P) and will provide the CAF with military Ka-band capacity from 65 to 90 degrees north. The Lightspeed constellation is expanding from 156 to 225 satellites, with MDA Space securing a [\\$474 million contract amendment](#) to produce the 27 additional satellites and add 500 megahertz of military Ka-band capacity to the satellites already under construction. All of the CSA's criteria outlined above are met here: Canadian ownership of the space segment, domestic manufacturing, and the ability to operate independently of U.S. architectures.

One caveat, however, is in order. The contract covers only the Ka-band component of the low-Earth orbit constellation (the UHF and X-band components in medium Earth orbit are still under negotiation), and its coverage, which both [Telesat](#) and the [Defence Capabilities Program](#) fact sheet place between 65 and 90 degrees north, excludes the southern latitudes where the majority of the CAF operates. The secure, jamming-resistant segment, meanwhile, falls under the U.S. Advanced Extremely High Frequency (AEHF) program, which this contract does not replace.

A sovereign space strategy for the CSA should aim to achieve three objectives: the replacement and expansion of the MCR, with enhanced resolution capabilities and diversified imaging modes (optical, infrared, synthetic aperture radar); the expansion of the Telesat model beyond the polar band alone, accompanied by a secure and jamming-resistant communications segment that is interoperable with European allies rather than dependent on the U.S. AEHF, as well as a program to ensure the resilience of positioning, navigation, and timing; and a contribution to Arctic maritime access surveillance systems via a constellation of microsatellites in polar orbit, whose low unit cost allows for large-scale deployment.

Air Surveillance

The Northern Warning System, NORAD's radar backbone, relies on 1980s technology incapable of detecting modern cruise missiles and hypersonic systems at effective ranges. The [Arctic Over-the-Horizon Radar](#) (A-OTHR) program aims to address this: with a budget of over \$6 billion, it builds on agreements signed in June 2026 with Australia and BAE Systems Australia, derived from JORN network technology, for initial operational capability in December 2029, [with full capability not expected until 2043](#). This program exemplifies the logic behind the CSA, a sovereign detection capability, based in Canada, acquired from a reliable non-U.S. Five Eyes ally, but its timeline creates a vulnerability window of nearly two decades, during which early warning will remain dependent on U.S. sensors.

A second air-based shortfall is the lack of advanced early warning and control aircraft: Canada is one of the few major NATO countries without any national AEW&C capability, which makes it unable to generate its own air picture beyond the ground-based radar horizon, particularly over the Arctic. Saab's [GlobalEye](#) option, based on the Bombardier Global 6500 airframe, would address this shortfall with a substantial amount of Canadian industrial content. The government selected Saab as the preferred supplier in May 2026 for six aircraft, but no contract has yet been signed, and the first delivery is not scheduled until 2037–2038, which will prolong the current gap by another decade. The choice also involves trade-offs that should be acknowledged. Compared with the Boeing E-7 Wedgetail selected by the United States, Australia, the United Kingdom, and, initially, NATO, the GlobalEye's business-jet airframe carries a smaller mission crew ([five to seven consoles rather than ten](#)), which limits its capacity to manage a large air battle, and its endurance of roughly eleven to twelve hours cannot, at present, be extended by air-to-air refueling. In

return, it offers higher altitude and longer unrefuelled range, lower operating costs, multi-domain surveillance (air, maritime, and ground), and, most importantly, a supply chain that does not run through Washington, an advantage made tangible when the United States [tied the purchase of E-7s to tariff relief](#) in August 2026. For the CSA, that last consideration outweighs the loss of cabin space.

The third shortcoming is the persistent lack of ISR: the MQ-9B drones ordered in 2023 will provide new endurance, but this is a U.S. platform, subject to U.S. export controls and support chains. A sovereign capability for high-altitude, long-endurance drones suitable for Arctic conditions has yet to be developed. Canada is not alone in this situation. The Eurodrone, the only institutional European program in this category, has become more of a cautionary tale than a viable option. Launched in 2015 and awarded a 7.1 billion euro contract in 2022 for 60 aircraft, it has still not taken flight: the first flight is now scheduled for [2029, with entry into service beyond 2030](#), and the program is torn apart by the conflict between Airbus and Dassault, with the latter confirming in July 2026 [that it had been ousted](#), while France has removed the aircraft from its military planning on the grounds that it would be “yesterday’s drone that we might have tomorrow.” Joining this program would make little sense for Canada. The French option, on the other hand, is worth considering: [the Aarok](#) from Turgis & Gaillard, a MALE drone that made its maiden flight in September 2025, boasts an endurance of over 24 hours, the ability to operate from rudimentary runways, a cost [falling between that of the Bayraktar and the Reaper](#), and a [maritime surveillance](#) version developed with Thales based on the AirMaster radar. Developed explicitly without any “dependence” on the United States, it fits the profile of a co-development partnership, including naval or Arctic adaptations, rather than a simple off-the-shelf purchase.

In contrast, in the HALE segment, there is no allied equivalent to the U.S. RQ-4 Global Hawk or MQ-4C Triton. No European country, nor Japan, nor South Korea, produces a conventionally powered drone capable of high-altitude flight (above 50,000 feet) and long endurance (several consecutive days in flight). This is therefore a segment where joint development among allies could fill a significant capability gap for continuous territorial surveillance and the ability to conduct precision strikes. A mixed fleet of persistent ISR assets, combining the MQ-9B in the short term, a European MALE partnership in the medium term, and sovereign Arctic HALE development in the long term, would align perfectly with the CSA approach.

Maritime Surveillance

In the maritime domain, surface surveillance relies on a partially adequate three-pronged approach: the MCR for satellite radar coverage and the detection of stealth vessels, patrol aircraft—the aging CP-140 Aurora, awaiting the P-8A Poseidon, whose deliveries are just beginning (initial capability expected in 2028–2029)—and the Harry DeWolf-class offshore patrol vessels, whose sensors remain limited. On the one hand, the P-8A perpetuates a structural

dependence on a U.S. platform for a function, maritime patrol and anti-submarine warfare, that lies at the heart of Canadian sovereignty. The CSA calls for mitigating this risk by diversifying the sensors that feed the system and the supporting systems surrounding it. On the other hand, the integration of these sources into a unified maritime picture—recognized, produced, and controlled by Canada—remains in its infancy: maritime security operations centers integrate civilian and military data, but the ability to correlate satellite imagery, aerial detection, and surface sensors across three oceans in real time still relies heavily on U.S. architectures.

It is, however, beneath the surface that the gap is most pronounced. Canada currently has no fixed underwater surveillance network (no equivalent, even a modest one, to the SOSUS-type hydrophone arrays that the United States deployed during the Cold War), no capability for detection beneath sea ice, and no means of knowing, autonomously and continuously, what is transiting through its Arctic waters, in the approaches to the Northwest Passage, or near its undersea infrastructure. This blind spot is all the more concerning as the underwater threat grows and the first Type 212CD submarines are not expected to be delivered [until 2034](#) according to the official schedule, and more likely 2036 according to the German [defence minister](#). Surveillance is thus the domain where command autonomy is at stake: without sovereign sensors, Canada cannot build its own operational picture, make decisions on its own, or even know what it does not know.

However, a plan does exist on paper and follows the right architecture: the Royal Canadian Navy's [UUSS](#) (*Uncrewed Underwater Surveillance System*) program, with a budget of over 5 billion dollars, calls for a combined capability of autonomous underwater vehicles and unmanned surface vehicles for persistent surveillance of the Arctic and coastal areas, supported by the Canadian Arctic Sensor Suite initiative, which is to provide the network's specialized maritime sensors, though the initial delivery of these is not expected until 2035–2036. The problem is the timeline: with an initial operational capability targeted for 2032–2033 and full capability after 2035, the program exactly mirrors the timeline of the manned submarines it was supposed to precede, leaving a gaping gap in the transition decade during which autonomous systems, similar to Australia's [Ghost Shark](#), which was developed and put into production in just a few years, could already be monitoring the Arctic approaches. The CSA's requirement, therefore, is not to create the program but to accelerate it: to treat the UUSS and the Sensor Suite as operational emergencies rather than ordinary equipment projects, drawing on a Canadian industrial base—Kraken Robotics, Cellula Robotics, ONC, and SMEs in underwater acoustics—and on integration into allied networks via NATO's [AUWB-MN](#) project, in which Canada is already participating.

Air and Missile Defence

The sensors mentioned above are only as valuable as the effectors they enable. Yet Canada currently has no ground-to-air air defence system to protect its territory. The decommissioning

of [the ADATS](#) in 2012 eliminated the last such capability without providing a successor. This capability gap is compounded by a long-standing political obstacle. By declaring on [February 24, 2005](#), that “Canada will not participate in the missile defence shield,” Ottawa created a lasting asymmetry in the continental defence architecture: NORAD provides early warning, while interception falls under the strict U.S. command of USNORTHCOM, from which Canada is excluded. As [Andrea Charron](#) summarizes, NORAD “warns of an incoming missile but has no say or role to play in its destruction.” Canada therefore co-funds the “eyes” of a system over which it has no “trigger control.”

The political obstacle to missile defence was lifted on July 16, 2025, when Minister McGuinty confirmed that [“the government has removed all restrictions on Canada’s air and missile defence plan.”](#) However, no capabilities have yet followed this opening. The [ground-based air defence system](#) project remains in the definition phase, with initial operational capability expected in 2027–2028 and full operational capability in 2032–2033. Its first tranche, the Saab RBS 70 NG, ordered in February 2024, was acquired to meet an urgent operational need for the multinational brigade led by Canada in Latvia, not for the defence of Canadian territory, and the request for proposals for the short-range phase was not issued until [April 9, 2026](#), with an initial capability targeted for November 2027.

The Canadian government has also expressed interest in the U.S. [“Golden Dome” program](#). Announced in May 2025, the program is now estimated by the Congressional Budget Office to cost [1,191 billion over twenty years](#), including a layer of some 7,800 space-based interceptors. President Trump has estimated Canada’s contribution at [61 billion U.S. dollars \(71 billion according to other estimates\)](#) and appears to [be demanding](#) the purchase of U.S. military equipment as part of that contribution.

Joining this program as a paying customer for an architecture whose sensors, interceptors, battle management, and rules of engagement would be entirely American would push Canadian dependence to its limit in a domain with far-reaching consequences: the decision to open fire over Canadian territory. Furthermore, the sheer size of the territory to be defended requires prioritization. The American Physical Society estimates that [1,600 orbital interceptors](#) would be needed to defend against a single North Korean missile. The ten batteries of Israel’s Iron Dome cover [a radius of approximately 150 kilometers](#), or some 22,000 square kilometers, a scale that is incomparable to the ten million square kilometers of Canadian territory.

The CSA approach requires that two intertwined threats and challenges be broken apart. On the one hand, the intercontinental ballistic and hypersonic threat, including Russia’s Avangard and China’s DF-41, falls under the realm of nuclear deterrence and an interceptor architecture beyond Canada’s budgetary and technological reach. Canada’s relevant contribution here lies in the sensors described above, not in interceptors. On the other hand, the air-launched threat is both

the most likely and the only one that Canada can address on its own. The [Kh-101](#), a stealth cruise missile with a range of 2,500 to 2,800 kilometers carried by the Tu-95MS and Tu-160, can be launched over the Arctic against Canadian targets without the bomber ever entering the range of Canadian fighter jets. It is this threat, along with that posed by one-way drones, that NORAD is mandated to counter and that Canada must be able to engage as a last resort.

Priority must therefore be given to an integrated short- and medium-range air and missile defence system, focused on a limited and explicit list of critical assets: bases housing fighter jets, Arctic over-the-horizon radar sites, command and control nodes, forward operating locations in the North, major ports, and energy infrastructure. This choice is primarily a matter of arithmetic. The CSIS calculates that engaging a [\\$35,000](#) Shahed drone with a NASAMS interceptor costing just over \$1 million results in a loss of more than \$600,000 per shot, whereas the same interceptor used against a cruise missile remains economically rational. [The IISS](#) adds that short-range capabilities represent NATO's most acute shortfall and that Europe has only "niche" capabilities in this regard, technologically advanced but lacking the necessary production volume and infrastructure. A defence system designed to cover urban centers would be both unaffordable and offer a poor cost-benefit ratio; a point-defence system, backed by the anti-drone architecture described above and low-cost effectors, is financially viable and operationally relevant.

The choice of supplier will be the true test for the CSA. NASAMS, often presented as a European solution, is not one: its launcher and fire control station are Norwegian, but its warhead is Raytheon's AMRAAM, which is subject to U.S. export controls. Canada has experienced this firsthand: the [\\$406 million](#) allocated in 2023 to purchase a NASAMS system for Ukraine had to go through a Foreign Military Sales (FMS) process and await approval from the U.S. Congress, extending the time between the decision and delivery to more than two years. Truly non-U.S. options do exist and are now mature: Diehl's [IRIS-T SLM](#), whose missile production has increased tenfold between 2021 and 2026, and, above all, Eurosam's [SAMP/T NG](#), whose Aster 30 B1NT missile engages targets up to 150 kilometers away and 25,000 meters in altitude with dual anti-air and anti-ballistic capabilities, supported by a GF300 radar with a range of 350 kilometers.

Canada is not without industrial strengths in this field. [Rheinmetall Canada](#), the successor to Oerlikon Aerospace in Saint-Jean-sur-Richelieu, which assembled the ADATS, already offers an air defence battle management system and a multi-mission radar developed with IAI Elta, currently in service in Canada, the Netherlands, Finland, and Greece. However, contracts must still align with the CSA's logic, a principle that the \$169 million in funding for the anti-drone program awarded in July 2025 to the U.S.-based company CACI hardly exemplifies. Finally, air defence alone does not provide deterrence: it is meaningful only when combined with the two capabilities examined below: namely, a combat fleet capable of engaging before they launch, and a deep-strike capability that shifts the cost-benefit balance against the aggressor.

Combat Aircraft

The fighter jet issue is a prime example of the tensions within the CSA. The contract for 88 F-35A aircraft, awarded to Lockheed Martin in 2023 for \$19 billion, was called into question by Prime Minister Carney in March 2025 in response to the U.S. trade war. An independent review followed, and in June 2025, the Auditor General released a [report](#) identifying serious problems: a cost increase of nearly 50% (with the project now totaling \$27.7 billion), infrastructure delays of more than three years, a shortage of qualified pilots, and project management shortcomings. At the time of this writing, only 16 of the 88 aircraft are under firm order, while the acquisition of the remaining 72 is still under review.

The CSA is advocating an approach that all governments have rejected since the 1980s: acquiring a mixed fleet of more than 130 combat aircraft. The figure is not arbitrary; it stems from the arithmetic of simultaneous missions required by a high-intensity war scenario. On the homeland defence front, it is necessary to permanently crew NORAD's rapid-response alert lines on two fronts, support air combat patrols over Arctic approaches in the face of Russian cruise missile and bomber raids (a mission that consumes a large number of aircraft, with each continuous patrol requiring four to six fighters on rotation along with their refueling aircraft), and maintain an interception reserve for the Atlantic and Pacific fronts.

On the European front, a credible contribution amounts to at least one sustainably supported expeditionary squadron of 12 to 18 deployed aircraft and, based on the one-third rule, 36 to 54 aircraft within the structure. Canada's fair share of the allied shortfall points in the same direction: [the IISS](#) estimates that 400 additional tactical fighter aircraft are needed to replace U.S. capabilities in Europe. Canada's share of this shortfall alone is approximately 30 to 35 aircraft. To this number must be added the operational training fleet (15 to 20 percent of the fleet), aircraft grounded for maintenance, and the attrition reserve. The sum of these requirements suggests a need for 130-160 aircraft: the 88 F-35s ordered, which were designed for a world in which the United States filled all the gaps, are not sufficient. Moreover, the Department of National Defence [is struggling](#) to meet its goal of deploying just [12 fighter jets in Europe](#) in addition to [the 36 needed](#) for the defence of North America, a goal it will likely only be able to achieve if all 88 F-35s are delivered on time and up to standard by 2034.

U.S. planning supports this calculation. Far from relying solely on fifth-generation aircraft to defend its territory, the U.S. Air Force plans to retain hundreds of [modernized F-16s well into the 2040s](#), equipped with AESA radars specifically designed to counter the threat of cruise missiles against the homeland, while the Air National Guard, which flies primarily fourth-generation aircraft, carries out [94% of U.S. homeland defence missions](#). If the world's leading air power deems it essential to maintain such a large fleet of affordable fighters for continental defence, Canada cannot be an exception. However, a fleet of 88 F-35s would yield, in a crisis situation, only

between 30 and 50 aircraft that are actually available, after accounting for training, maintenance, and attrition: a number that is clearly insufficient to ensure Canada's share of the continent's aerospace defence, especially if U.S. fighters were redeployed to the Indo-Pacific, and even less so to simultaneously contribute to the defence of Europe. More are needed.

History sheds light on the scale of this compromise. During the Cold War, Canada simultaneously fielded several combat fleets (CF-101s for continental defence, CF-104s in Europe, and CF-5s in support), totaling hundreds of aircraft. The acquisition of 138 CF-18s in the 1980s marked the transition to a single-fleet structure, and every subsequent decision has scaled back the fleet: 80 modernized CF-18s, 65 F-35s announced in 2010, and 88 ultimately ordered in 2023. This downward trajectory was based on an assumption that is now obsolete: U.S. support guaranteed coverage for missions that Canada could not undertake on its own. The CSA overturns this assumption, and a mixed fleet is the logical consequence.

With this in mind, we recommend maintaining the F-35 order and, rather than adding a second fleet of current-generation fighters, investing in the next generation of air combat systems. This is the position that one of us and the former Commander of the Royal Canadian Air Force, Lieutenant General [Yvan Blondin](#), have [argued](#): a second fleet is not an immediate alternative to the F-35 but a complement that becomes relevant after 2035, once the RCAF has absorbed the F-35 and closed its personnel deficits, and once collaborative combat drones and sixth-generation programs have reached maturity. A second segment of approximately 50 aircraft built around a sixth-generation system developed with non-U.S. allies, and operating with a larger number of collaborative combat drones, would then provide the mass, the dispersed-operations capacity, and the lower cost per sortie that the F-35 cannot deliver, without committing Canada to a platform that will be approaching obsolescence by the time it is fully integrated. The Swedish ecosystem illustrates what such a partnership could look like. Saab's [offer](#) to assemble aircraft in Canada and involve the country in the development of the next generation of fighter jets took on new significance in August 2026, when Saab unveiled the prototype of its Autonomous Collaborative Platform (ACP): a stealthy, supersonic [collaborative combat drone](#) designed to operate in tandem with the Gripen E and the GlobalEye, two of whose Sweden-funded demonstrators are scheduled to fly before 2030.

The division of roles between the two segments aligns with the requirements of both theaters. The F-35s carry out missions where stealth is indispensable: defence against cruise missile strikes in a dense electronic warfare environment, penetration of integrated air defences, and high-end operations in Europe, now equipped with [JSM missiles](#). The second segment provides the bulk of the fleet: crewed next-generation aircraft controlling collaborative combat drones conduct sovereignty patrols and air policing at a far lower cost per sortie, operate from dispersed locations such as rudimentary airfields and roads, and sustain a steady flow of sorties when F-35 availability declines.

However, the Royal Canadian Air Force does not have the resources, in the short term, to integrate two fleets simultaneously in terms of maintenance, pilot training, logistics, and infrastructure. The solution is phased implementation: complete the F-35's entry into service by 2034, build the necessary infrastructure and personnel capacity in parallel, and then introduce the second segment from 2035 onward, as next-generation systems become available.

The choice of program for this second segment is therefore critical for the CSA. Canada has two main options. The first is to join the Global Combat Air Program (GCAP), which brings together the United Kingdom, Japan, and Italy to develop a 6th-generation fighter incorporating artificial intelligence, distributed sensors, and open architecture. This option offers Canada access to cutting-edge technology and an industrial partnership with non-U.S. allies. The second option is a contribution to another allied program, which remains in the exploratory phase at this stage. The Swedish ecosystem now offers the most concrete example of this: the Swedish Future Combat Aircraft concept program, of which the ACP constitutes the unmanned component, opens a path for Canada's industrial and technological participation that does not run through Washington. Whichever program is chosen, the decision should be made early enough for Canada to enter as a development partner rather than as a late customer: industrial and technological participation, and the control over the system that comes with it, is what distinguishes this option from an off-the-shelf purchase.

Regardless of the option chosen, Canada's contribution should focus on the development of autonomous intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) systems and long-range strike capabilities, combat drones integrated into the manned fighter architecture. Long-range autonomous systems capable of conducting persistent ISR in the Canadian Arctic, detecting submarines, cruise missiles, or unidentified incursions, and capable, if necessary, of precision strikes without endangering Canadian pilots, represent a major sovereign capability.

Deep-Strike Capabilities

The capability to conduct deep strikes against enemy centers of gravity may seem unrelated to territorial defence, but it is complementary. A purely defensive posture does not make sense from a cost-benefit perspective: interceptors cost two to four million dollars each, far more than the missiles they engage, and at least two are needed per target for a 90% probability of interception. A defender who limits himself to interception will be exhausted by an attacker who can replenish his forces. This is why air and missile defence alone cannot provide deterrence: it must be coupled with a credible counterstrike capability. Furthermore, threats against Canadian territory can be launched from a safe distance, such as by Russian bombers or submarines firing cruise missiles from Arctic waters. In a scenario of war against Russia without U.S. support, the European theory of victory relies on deep strikes and treats stockpiles of long-range munitions as strategic assets comparable to armored divisions. A Canadian deep-strike capability would

thus be valuable in both theaters if Canada were to find itself at war with Russia without U.S. support.

However, Canada currently has no strike capability beyond the range of its fighter jets armed with short-range munitions. The Halifax-class frigates carry only Harpoon anti-ship missiles with limited range, and the Victoria-class submarines carry only torpedoes; land-based artillery has a maximum range of about 30 kilometers with no long-range rockets available; the Long Range Precision Strike (Land) project, intended to address this shortfall, remains in the options analysis phase, with an initial delivery scheduled no earlier than 2030–2031; and the Switchblade loitering munitions acquired on an emergency basis for Latvia have a range of 40 kilometers. The acquisition trajectory, however, is marking a real turning point. The [River-class](#) destroyers will carry, in addition to Kongsberg's NSM anti-ship missiles, a 24-cell Mk 41 vertical launch system including the Tomahawk for naval fire support, Canada's first long-range land-attack capability in decades. And in July 2026, Ottawa ordered [Kongsberg's JSM air-to-ground missiles](#) for its F-35s [for more than 400 million euros](#), an internally carried munition combining anti-ship and coastal strike capabilities. In late July 2026, the Department of National Defence also launched the [Canadian Deep Precision Strike Capability](#) (CDPSC) project, led by the Canadian Joint Forces Command: explicitly presented as a sovereign capability focused on autonomy, artificial intelligence, and the building of sufficient stockpiles for sustainable use, it will be the subject of an [initial consultation session with industry](#) as early as August 2026. Three limitations, however, temper this progress. The first is temporal: none of this will be operational before the mid-2030s. The second is residual dependence: the Tomahawk is a U.S. munition whose supply, upgrades, and mission planning are under Washington's control, precisely the type of capability that could be withheld in the event of a political rift. The third is arithmetic: 24 cells per ship, divided between area air defence and strike missions, do not constitute sufficient capability to sustain [weeks of high-intensity operations](#).

The CSA options for addressing these shortcomings are organized into four complementary components. The first is high-end allied diversification, for which the JSM order serves as a model: deepening the Kongsberg partnership to include future programs such as the German-Norwegian 3SM Tyrfing supersonic missile, and seeking Canada's participation in the [European Long-Range Strike Approach](#) (ELSA). The letter of intent signed in February 2026 by France, Germany, Italy, Poland, the United Kingdom, and Sweden outlines plans for a ground-to-ground cruise missile with a range of 1,000 to 2,000 kilometers, expected in the early 2030s. The second component is low-cost mass production in Canada: following the example of the British Project Brakestop (600 kilometers range at a unit cost of less than \$500,000) and the Ukrainian approach, which combines [inexpensive long-range drones against fixed infrastructure with a limited number of precision strikes against hardened targets](#), a domestically produced line of one-way effectors represents the fastest, most economically sustainable, and most industrial-capacity-building

option. The defence drone initiative, which includes deep-strike precision strike systems among its priorities, provides the vehicle for their acquisition. The third component concerns delivery systems: Type 212CD submarines will eventually provide a stealthy strike platform, and armed variants of large autonomous underwater vehicles would expand the capacity to keep naval and coastal targets at bay from Canadian waters. Finally, the fourth component is the foundation for all the others: the targeting chain. A strike is autonomous only if detection, designation, and effects assessment are also autonomous. Without sovereign ISR, a Canadian missile remains a munition guided by others.

This is where the initiatives outlined in this roadmap converge: the space-based, airborne, and underwater sensors discussed in the previous sections, the C5ISR architecture, and deep-strike capabilities form a single operational chain, which the CSA is tasked with controlling from end to end. Complemented by the R&D effort on cruise and hypersonic missiles recommended below, these options chart a realistic course: not the immediate attainment of the CSA's third threshold, which is out of reach before 2040, but a methodical approach toward it: Norwegian munitions upon the F-35's entry into service, Tomahawks alongside the River missiles, sovereign mass effectors by 2030, and European programs by the turn of the decade.

Defending Allies Through Strategic Autonomy

For Europeans, fighting “like the Americans without the Americans” is a strategic dead end. NATO’s current concept of operations, which rests on the central notion of multi-domain operations (MDO), is based on a theory of victory in which Russian forces are dislocated by superior technological integration and “decision dominance.” However, this theory of victory is built around American strategic capabilities, and the causal logic behind its success is, at best, questionable. Analyses examining how European NATO would fight in the absence of U.S. support show that an American withdrawal would deprive Europe of indispensable integration capabilities and irreplaceable enablers for at least a decade. The United States functions as the Alliance’s operating system. Its departure would necessitate a more cautious, more positional, and more attritional approach to warfare, simply out of necessity.

A theory of European victory without the United States now exists in draft form in the literature, and it deliberately breaks with the American model. Its guiding principle is based on denial and exhaustion: Bélanger, Larsen, and Schmitt formulate it as “strategic denial through continental attrition,” in which any Russian gain becomes too costly, too exposed, and too unstable to serve as a fait accompli, and in which victory consists of the gradual erosion of Russia’s ability to regenerate its combat power through deep strikes into Russian territory. This theory is based on three premises validated by the Ukrainian experience: the defender’s structural advantage on the contemporary battlefield, saturated with sensors and precision-guided munitions; the industrial advantage of a Europe whose GDP is approximately ten times that of Russia; and the requirement for political sustainability of a democratic coalition engaged in a war lasting two to five years, which precludes offensives resulting in heavy casualties.

The theory of European victory is structured around four lines of effort: continental denial along the eastern border, reconfigured as a reconnaissance-strike complex; deep strikes against the nodes of the Russian war economy; maritime and economic strangulation, from the Baltic to the GIUK corridor; and the total defence of European societies. The resulting deterrent posture is explicitly attritional: promising Russia that any attempt against Europe will trap it in a new war of attrition.

Large-scale precision strikes

For Canada, this theory of victory has a direct implication for capabilities: the most valuable contributions to European defence are no longer just high-tech platforms interoperable with American forces, but the attritional firepower that can be produced in large volumes (drones,

loitering munitions, artillery shells, missiles, interceptors). From this perspective, ammunition stocks, industrial depth, and [sovereign ISR](#) constitute vital strategic assets for defending Europe against Russia. The ability to conduct large-scale precision strikes is therefore the cornerstone of any burden-shifting from the United States to its allies to assume primary responsibility for the conventional defence of the European continent.

Europe's long-range precision strike capability is currently insufficient. ELSA remains a program rather than a deployed capability, and stocks of Storm Shadow, SCALP, and Taurus missiles are [limited](#) (a few hundred of each), with production capacity remaining low. This contrasts with Russia's annual production of hundreds of long-range missiles; Russia is now capable of launching [about 100 per month](#) against Ukraine.

Interceptors

No aspect of European defence illustrates the gap between needs and resources more starkly than that of interceptors. The need is primarily quantitative and is dictated by Russia's production capacity: Ukrainian intelligence estimates that Russia produces [840 to 1,020 short- and medium-range ballistic missiles per year](#), in addition to cruise missiles and more than a thousand long-range drones per month, while its air force maintains approximately 1,400 operational combat aircraft. The war in Ukraine has demonstrated Russia's method of mixed saturation strikes—waves of inexpensive drones to wear down and pinpoint the defence, and ballistic and cruise missiles to breach it—designed precisely to deplete the defender's stockpiles faster than they can be replenished. Defending Europe therefore requires winning this battle of stockpiles in order to prevent the collapse of the ability to “win over the long term” in the face of Russian firepower directed at European centers of gravity (air bases, landing ports, logistics hubs, command centers, defence industries, electrical infrastructure, communication networks, etc.).

Since intercepting every threat with high-end munitions is economically unsustainable, the required response is a [multi-layered surface-to-air system](#) in which high-end interceptors are reserved for high-value threats, while less costly threats are handled through electronic warfare, short-range counter-drone measures, decoys, dispersion, infrastructure hardening, and offensive action against launch systems.

The current situation in Europe is one of genuine but uneven progress. The European Sky Shield initiative, launched for the joint acquisition of air defence systems, illustrates the minilateral logic of [the patchwork European security framework](#) analyzed by Weber, which is useful for aggregating demand, but still far from constituting the integrated layered architecture that continental denial requires, and marked by competition between American (Patriot), European (SAMP/T NG), and Israeli (Arrow 3) solutions. Production remains the critical bottleneck, which is why Bélanger, Larsen, and Schmitt identify the production of Patriot interceptors as [a candidate](#)

for transatlantic co-development, following the institutional model that transformed the artillery shell industry: large-scale, multi-year contracts; deliberate redundancy of production lines across countries; and treating ammunition as a strategic enabler.

For Canada, this initiative represents a contribution to Europe's defence that is both realistic and high value, not primarily batteries, which the Europeans are acquiring, but ammunition and industrial depth. Three avenues are open to Ottawa. The first is the acquisition, for the Canadian brigade in Latvia, of a ground-based air defence system with stockpiles sufficient for the long term, a capability of which the CAF remains largely devoid (the current urgent operational need provides the brigade with only a very short-range system, whereas the Ground-Based Air Defence (GBAD) project, still in the definition phase, does not anticipate initial delivery before 2027–2028 or full capability before 2032–2033), and which is fully interchangeable with the protection of critical assets on Canadian territory. The second is the participation of the Canadian Defence Industrial Base (CDIB) in the allied production effort: rocket engines, propellants, guidance components, and mission electronics are precisely the segments where allied bottlenecks are most acute and where Canadian industry can integrate into the value chains for interceptors, whether through transatlantic co-production of the Patriot system or European supply chains. The third area is the low end of the spectrum: low-cost anti-drone interceptors with reduced collateral damage are already among the priorities of the Defence Drone Initiative Market, and this niche is where Canadian SMEs can most quickly ramp up volume production, both to meet Canadian needs and to serve an allied market with structural demand. The most strategic Canadian contribution would therefore be one that stocks the shelves to enable Europe to succeed in the long run.

Facilitators

While the United States functions as the Alliance's operating system, we must also pay attention to the facilitators that provide its foundations. Among the most important capabilities on which allies depend for the United States to conduct independent operations are strategic transport, aerial refueling, early warning, and electronic warfare. For Canada, this shortfall presents an opportunity to provide allies with military capabilities that are crucial to European security and compatible with the requirements for defending Canada's vast territory.

Canada's current situation presents an opportunity here. With a planned fleet of eight CC-330 Husky aircraft (combining aerial refueling and strategic transport capabilities on an Airbus A330 airframe) Canada is part of a select group of allies equipped with modern transport and refueling capabilities, capable of supporting both NATO's regional plans and the defence of Canada's vast territory. But the requirement to simultaneously meet needs at home and in Europe in the event of a high-intensity conflict with Russia, without U.S. support, calls for a clear-eyed assessment. Taking maintenance into account, four to five deployable tanker aircraft cannot simultaneously

support NORAD's Arctic patrols and an air mission in Europe. A fleet expanded to 12 or 15 aircraft would give this capability the depth required by the CSA.

The same reasoning applies to air early warning: selecting Saab as the preferred supplier for [six GlobalEye](#) aircraft would provide Canada with an AEW&C capability that is interchangeable between the Arctic and the eastern flank, at a time when NATO itself [is negotiating](#) for [up to ten aircraft](#) to replace its AWACS. But six aircraft can support only one permanent surveillance orbit, whereas Canada's geography requires at least two. The Canadian fleet would therefore need to be doubled to ensure autonomous, permanent surveillance across two theaters of operation, or at least expanded to 8 or 10 aircraft to provide a useful residual capability for the European theater.

Conversely, Canada has only an embryonic electronic warfare capability. On land, it has only the 21st Electronic Warfare Regiment, which lacks the means to support a brigade in high-intensity combat against an adversary possessing divisional-level electronic warfare capabilities, such as those fielded by Russia. That said, the project to [modernize](#) land-based intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) modules is underway, and the [Defence Drone Initiative contract](#) explicitly includes electronic warfare systems among its five components, offering significant potential for capability enhancement. At sea, the River-class destroyers will be equipped with the [American AN/SLQ-32\(V\)6 suite](#) and Nulka decoys, providing a modern self-defence capability, albeit one that is American-made and strictly defensive. In the air, Canada has no airborne electronic attack capability, no offensive jamming or escort aircraft comparable to the American EA-18G Growler. The buildup is therefore underway, but it remains piecemeal, scattered across projects lacking an overarching architecture, devoid of an offensive component, and reliant on U.S. systems for its most modern components. Canadian electronic warfare thus remains far from meeting the scale and independence requirements demanded by the CSA.

Submarine Fleet

The submarine threat that Canada must counter is twofold. In the North Atlantic and the Arctic, the primary threat remains Russia. Russia's naval capabilities have been largely unaffected by the conflict in Ukraine, and Moscow [is expanding](#) its submarine and maritime capabilities. However, this growing threat is met by a shrinking allied response. In NATO's regional plans, anti-submarine warfare in the North Atlantic relies disproportionately on the United States. [The IISS](#) estimates that there are ten U.S. nuclear-powered attack submarines assigned to a European contingency, and its industrial assessment is unequivocal: of all U.S. capabilities, SSNs would be the most difficult to replace, as French and British shipyards would be unable, even with substantial investment, to meet this demand in the coming decade. The withdrawal, even partial, of U.S. submarines from defence plans would therefore create a considerable capability gap in the North Atlantic. It is in this context that the Canadian contribution must be assessed: each allied

submarine maintaining a blockade line in the GIUK Gap or the Arctic approaches frees up a scarce European SSN for missions that only it can carry out (escorting naval task forces, strike operations, and intelligence gathering in contested areas).

The planned acquisition of twelve Type 212CD submarines partially meets these requirements. A fleet of twelve vessels allows for the simultaneous deployment of at most two submarines in the Atlantic Ocean and one in the Pacific, after accounting for maintenance, crew training, and transit times. This is a real but modest capability given the three-ocean geography and the allied shortfall that needs to be addressed. This fleet must therefore be supplemented, as three deployed submarines provide neither the persistence nor the mass required to address the full spectrum of threats. The required supplement is a large-scale program of autonomous underwater vehicles conducted in partnership with non-U.S. allies. The potential ecosystem for this program already exists: the TKMS industrial partnership launched by the Canadian Patrol Submarine Project (CPSP), Saab's Autonomous Ocean Core program selected for NATO's [AUWB-MN](#) (Allied Underwater Battlespace Mission Network) project, and Australia's Ghost Shark program. Added to this is a munitions requirement, stocks of torpedoes and missiles, of which [allied inventories](#) number in the hundreds rather than the thousands.

Divisions

The need for Canadian troops to defend Europe can be determined based on NATO's formal requirements. The [new force model](#) adopted at the Madrid Summit organizes allied readiness into three tiers: more than 100,000 military personnel mobilizable within ten days or less (Tier 1), approximately 200,000 within ten to thirty days (Tier 2), and at least 500,000 within thirty to one hundred eighty days (Tier 3), for a total pool exceeding 800,000 highly available military personnel, pre-assigned to regional defence plans.

Assuming a U.S. withdrawal that would require the remaining allies to fill the entire gap, Canada's fair share, based on population, amounts to 6.5 percent. This translates to 6,500 to 7,000 service members on ten days' notice, approximately 13,000 on ten to thirty days' notice, and 32,000 to 33,000 on thirty to one hundred eighty days' notice, for a total contribution of approximately 50,000 service members on a phased-in basis. In other words, this is equivalent to slightly more than one heavy brigade at the first echelon, one division at the second echelon, and two divisions at the final echelon, for a total of slightly more than three divisions. This Canadian contribution compares to the Cold War era, when Canada [deployed](#) a ground brigade of approximately 6,000 service members to Europe between the 1950s and 1960s, along with an airborne division, both of which were reduced by half starting in the 1970s, with another ground brigade and a reinforcement squadron deployable in wartime.

The contrast with current capabilities illustrates just how far we still have to go. The Department of National Defence's plans and priorities indicate that the CAF is currently struggling to support the deployment of more than 2,200 service members. The single brigade group in Latvia, which aims to reach 2,600 members this year, accounts for the bulk of operational readiness. In fact, the Department of National Defence does not expect to be able to meet its current targets until 2032, targets that are equivalent to only a single brigade deployed on an extended basis. Consequently, the planned expansion of the regular force from 71,500 to 85,500 service members and of the primary reserve force from 30,000 to 100,000 service members, as well as the establishment of an additional reserve force of 300,000 citizen-soldiers, are essential to meeting NATO's capability targets. However, the Canadian Armed Forces are planning only to develop the capacity to sustain a single division of 15,000 soldiers for a major combat operation. There is therefore a shortfall of two divisions compared to the NATO force model, possibly including one armored division and one naval aviation division.

Recommendations

This paper has established the framework, threat environment, constraints, and capabilities for a CSA. They all point to one conclusion: for the first time since 1987, Canada has the financial resources and political will necessary to build credible strategic autonomy. But those resources and that political will could disappear just as quickly as they emerged. The following recommendations aim to provide a roadmap for turning the CSA's stated ambition into reality.

Develop a New Defence Policy

The most fundamental shortcoming of Canada's current defence policy is the absence of a document that explicitly addresses the following questions: Why does Canada need strategic autonomy? Against what threats? For what purposes? Based on what principles for prioritizing capabilities?

Our Strong and Free North (2024) is a re-capitalization document, not a defence policy in the strict sense. The DIS is an industrial strategy, not a national security strategy. Neither document defines Canada's vital national interests, the corresponding posture of strength, or the doctrine for the use of forces. This conceptual gap undermines the coherence of procurement decisions, fuels contradictions between political statements and concrete decisions, and makes it impossible to have an informed public debate on the costs and benefits of the CSA.

The new defence policy should therefore explicitly define the two vital national interests (the defence of Canada's territorial integrity and the deterrence or defeat of an attack against allies); articulate the doctrine of defence against help as a guiding principle; identify the threat scenarios against which Canada must be able to act autonomously; and establish a clear hierarchy of capability investments based on their contribution to each of the vital interests. This policy should be periodically reviewed, every five years, to take into account changes in the strategic environment.

Publish a detailed ten-year investment plan

Budget 2025 announced \$81.8 billion in defence reinvestment, and the DIS allocated \$6.6 billion over five years to sovereign capabilities. These figures are significant, but they do not constitute a military programming plan. A ten-year investment plan must specify, on a project-by-project basis, annual financial commitments, delivery milestones, monitoring and accountability mechanisms, as well as indicators of progress toward the CSA.

Such a plan is necessary for three reasons. First, multi-year planning is essential for industrial credibility; Canadian companies and European partners cannot invest in the production

capabilities required for the CSA without sufficient visibility into long-term demand, a need that the industry itself has expressed. Second, budget transparency is essential for democratic accountability and debate. Parliament and civil society cannot assess whether Canada is making progress toward its CSA goals without a clear framework of reference. Third, programmatic discipline is essential for a coherent strategy. The absence of such a plan has led to contradictions between the government's ambitions and actual procurement decisions.

This plan should cover the following areas: the recapitalization of the CAF (land, naval, and air assets); investments in sovereign capabilities identified by the DIS (drones, AEW&C, submarines, satellites, C5ISR); investments in infrastructure (Arctic bases, forward airfields, shipyards); investments in personnel (recruitment, training, retention); and investments in research and development for sovereign technologies. It should be made public, validated by the Parliamentary Budget Officer, and subject to an annual review by the House of Commons Standing Committee on National Defence.

Funding Research and Development

Strategic autonomy depends on technological mastery. However, Canadian defence R&D is chronically underfunded. Canada allocates approximately 1.4% of its defence budget to it, compared to an average of over 3% in NATO and more than 13% in the United States. BOREALIS, the new defence R&D entity allocated \$68.2 million by the DIS, is a first step, but one that is strikingly modest given the stakes.

A sovereign R&D program for the CSA should prioritize autonomous aerial and underwater systems capable of ISR and precision strikes; sensors and signal processing systems for underwater and space surveillance; secure military communications, particularly post-quantum cryptography, which is essential to the resilience of C5ISR systems; and long-range precision munitions (cruise missiles and hypersonic missiles) the absence of which currently represents the most glaring gap in the CAF's deep-strike capability. This program should be funded at a level of at least 3% of the total defence budget, with mechanisms for technology transfer between Canada's cutting-edge civilian sector (artificial intelligence, quantum computing, robotics) and the defence industry.

Funding an Ecosystem for the CSA

The fourth recommendation is perhaps the most fundamental in the long term. The most rigorous analyses of the CSA come from independent researchers and think tanks. These institutions provide the intellectual foundation without which no coherent defence policy can be built or sustained over time in the face of opposing political pressures.

However, funding for security and defence research in Canada is insufficient, fragmented, and overly reliant on one-off projects. The total budget for engaging experts from outside of DND amounts to only about \$4.5 million per year. Comparable institutions, such as the IRSEM, the RAND Corporation, the IISS, and the RUSI, do not exist.

An independent analytical ecosystem is necessary for three distinct functions. The first is the analysis of threats and geopolitical trends; governments cannot anticipate strategic developments without institutions capable of analyzing them over the medium and long term, independent of electoral and bureaucratic constraints. The second is the analysis of operational requirements, bridging the gap between equipment acquisitions and doctrines of use requires a detailed analysis of lessons learned from ongoing conflicts. Independent researchers are needed to facilitate the discussion and evaluation of the requirements identified by the armed forces.

The third function is to contribute to the social acceptability of the costs of the CSA. Strategic autonomy comes at a price. A defence budget of 3.5% of GDP, investments in systems whose utility is not immediately apparent to citizens, and controversial procurement decisions. All of this requires an informed public debate. Without an analytical ecosystem capable of explaining why these investments are, or are not necessary, what threats they are intended to address, and what their costs and benefits are, the government will remain constantly vulnerable to critics who portray such spending as wasteful. The experience of the most advanced European democracies in the field of defence, such as Sweden, Finland, and Norway, shows that the resilience of defence policy in the face of political and public pressures is directly linked to the quality and independence of the analytical ecosystem that supports it.

The Canadian government should therefore establish structural, multi-year funding for security and defence research institutions, create a national program of doctoral and postdoctoral fellowships in strategic and security studies, and encourage the creation of a Canadian RAND-type institution capable of conducting integrated analyses covering the military, industrial, economic, and geopolitical dimensions of the CSA. This investment, modest in absolute terms (in the range of tens of millions of dollars per year), would have a strategic multiplier effect incomparably greater than the same amount spent on equipment.

Risks and Consequences

The pursuit of strategic autonomy is not without consequences or risks, and any honest roadmap must clearly identify them rather than conceal them behind the rhetorical momentum of the moment. Three categories of consequences deserve to be lucidly acknowledged by anyone embarking on this path.

The first is structural and long-term: strategic autonomy requires sustained and patient support for the Canadian defence industry, of a nature and duration unprecedented in the recent history of Canadian industrial policy. Building sovereign capabilities cannot be achieved through a single budget. It requires predictable multi-year government contracts, sustained investment in research and development over decades, rigorously negotiated transfers of intellectual property, and the political will to protect these industrial capabilities from short-term commercial pressures and electoral cycles. The experience of the most advanced allies in this area—Sweden with Saab, South Korea with its naval complex, and France with its defence industrial and technological base—shows that industrial autonomy in defence is the result of a generation of continuous investment, not a five-year plan. Canada has a long way to go: its defence industry is deeply integrated with that of the United States, its sovereign production capabilities are limited to a few niche areas of excellence, and its institutional procurement culture has historically favored off-the-shelf purchases over domestic development. Reversing this trend is possible, but it will take time, probably a generation, and will require political consistency that Canada has not yet demonstrated.

The second risk is geopolitical and immediate: diversifying partnerships and reducing dependence on the United States expose Canada to U.S. coercion, the most likely form of which is not an open military threat, but a refusal to cooperate in areas where interdependence runs deepest. Washington wields considerable leverage: access to intelligence data shared through the Five Eyes and NORAD, the supply of spare parts and upgrades for U.S. weapons systems already in service with the Canadian Armed Forces, participation in allied training programs, and access to cutting-edge technologies subject to U.S. export controls. A Canada that acquires non-U.S. fighter jets, develops sovereign satellites, builds submarines with German and Norwegian partners, and participates in European long-range strike programs runs the risk of seeing the United States gradually restrict its cooperation in these sensitive areas, not out of overt hostility, but through the ordinary dynamics of reciprocity and national preference that every U.S. administration, regardless of its political orientation, applies to its defence relations. This risk is real, but it is manageable provided it is anticipated: a gradual transition, conducted transparently with Washington and accompanied by the maintenance of interoperability on core missions, is infinitely less risky than a sudden break. In other words, the approach of *hedging* without

decoupling—that is, not turning our backs on the United States, but methodically building alternatives that reduce Canada's vulnerability to a U.S. refusal—should be prioritized.

The third risk is time-related: strategic autonomy takes a very long time to build, and the duration of this process is directly proportional to the scope and depth of autonomy that Canada chooses to pursue. Command autonomy, having functional, sovereign C5ISR systems, can be achieved within a decade. Credible denial autonomy in the Arctic, based on an operational submarine fleet and a sovereign space surveillance network, will instead require fifteen to twenty years, given the delivery times for submarines, the ramp-up of industrial capacity, and crew training. Autonomy in deep-strike capabilities, the ability to interdict or strike long-range adversary targets without relying on U.S. assets, will not be achieved until after 2040, at best. This time lag between stated ambition and actual capability creates a prolonged window of vulnerability, during which Canada will be simultaneously engaged in a costly transition and still dependent on the allied capabilities it seeks to supplement. It also creates a domestic political risk: successive governments that inherit this project will not see its fruits before the end of their terms and will be tempted to slow its pace in favor of spending that yields more visible electoral returns. The real question, therefore, is not whether Canada can achieve strategic autonomy, it can, provided it accepts the cost and the time required, but whether its political institutions are capable of staying the course toward a generational goal in a democratic environment that is structurally biased toward the short term. That is why, in the final analysis, the roadmap to strategic autonomy is not merely an arms program: it is a test of strategic maturity for a country that, for the first time since 1945, is forced to seriously ask itself what it is prepared to defend, on its own, and to what extent.

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