THOUGHT LEADERSHIP

BUSINESS + HIGHER EDUCATION ROUNDTABLE

FROM SPENDING TO READINESS: WHY CANADA'S DEFENCE STRATEGY MUST ALSO BE A TALENT STRATEGY

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Canada has entered a new era of defence investment.

In Halifax and Vancouver, shipyards are expanding to deliver new fleets for the Royal Canadian Navy (RCN) under the National Shipbuilding Strategy. On shop floors, that means new demands for welders working to tight specifications, engineers integrating propulsion, communications, and combat systems, and supply chains coordinating thousands of components to keep production on track.

In Cold Lake and Bagotville, the Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF) is building operational capacity, from training new pilots to maintaining aircraft systems that must perform under pressure. In Petawawa, Edmonton, and Valcartier, Canadian Army personnel are training, equipping, and deploying forces across a range of missions, relying on logistics, coordination, and technical expertise to sustain operations.

Much of what's required to support these efforts is not unique to defence. The same skills used to train pilots, maintain aircraft, build ships, operate advanced manufacturing systems, or manage complex logistics networks are already in use across civilian industries. Scaling investment is not the same as scaling capability.

Across the armed forces and defence industry, translating investment into real capability will depend on talent, training capacity, and coordination. As investment increases, these factors will begin to define what can actually be delivered.

The constraint, in other words, will not be capital. It will be the ability to act in a coordinated way, rather than in silos. Without coordination, efforts fragment, duplication increases, funding is not always directed where it has the greatest impact, and gains in readiness remain limited.

The good news is that many of the building blocks already exist.

1. TRAINING SYSTEMS CAN SCALE, IF THEY'RE CONNECTED

The first building block is the ability to train people at pace.

In aviation, companies like CAE use high-fidelity simulators to train pilots to operate in high-pressure environments, working with post-secondary partners like Algonquin College, Mount Royal University, and First Nations Technical Institute.

These systems are designed to move large numbers of trainees through standardized programs while maintaining safety and performance.

Centennial College is developing talent for Air Canada and Bombardier, while Royal Roads, Humber, and SaskPoly are working with employers in aerospace, advanced manufacturing, and transportation to build talent pipelines aligned with defence needs.

A similar model exists in shipbuilding. Companies like Irving Shipbuilding and Seaspan are expanding production and building workforce pipelines in partnership with institutions like NSCC, BCIT, and other regional colleges, unions, and apprenticeship programs. Across advanced manufacturing, modular training programs bring new workers up to speed on complex systems. At Linamar, workers are trained through structured, on-the-job modules that allow them to move quickly between roles as demand shifts.

Post-secondary institutions are embedded throughout industry. Taken together, these efforts amount to a distributed training system with significant latent capacity. The opportunity is to connect and expand it by shifting more training delivery into post-secondary and industry-led environments and allowing the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) to focus on operational readiness. With stronger coordination, this system can scale at the speed and level required to match Canada's defence investments.

2. TALENT EXISTS, BUT THE SYSTEM DOESN'T MOBILIZE IT

A second building block is how effectively talent can move across sectors.

In civilian aerospace maintenance facilities, technicians inspect, repair, and certify aircraft systems to exacting safety standards. In advanced manufacturing plants, operators run automated production lines, monitor complex systems, and troubleshoot in real time.

In logistics hubs, teams coordinate the movement of equipment and materials across distributed networks. These are not separate skill sets.

They are variations of the same capabilities: working in high-reliability environments, following precise procedures, and coordinating across systems under pressure.

Companies like Magellan Aerospace and IMP Aerospace & Defence employ thousands of technicians, engineers, and maintenance specialists working on aircraft systems, aligned with the RCAF's needs. At the same time, colleges like SAIT, NAIT, and NSCC, and universities like Carleton, RMC, Waterloo, and UBC, are producing graduates in engineering, applied trades, and defence-related fields.

Much of this talent is already doing defence-relevant work across civilian industries, but outside the systems that connect it to defence roles. This does not have to be a fragmented labour pool; it can be a cross-sector talent base with the potential to support defence at scale.

The opportunity is to mobilize this talent more effectively by strengthening pathways into and out of defence and civilian roles. With more fluid career movement and clearer translation of skills between civilian and military contexts, this talent can be deployed where it is needed most.

3. PROCUREMENT CAN ANCHOR CAPABILITY, BUT DOESN'T CONSISTENTLY

A third building block is the Government of Canada looking to Canadian companies first to deploy and grow our defence capacity.

Capability already exists within Canadian companies, but it is not consistently anchored to domestic defence demand. Procurement has the opportunity to better connect this system, creating clearer pathways from development through to deployment across advanced manufacturing and dual-use sectors.

In advanced manufacturing facilities, production lines are configured to switch between products, integrate new components, and scale output quickly in response to demand. In space and communications companies, engineers design and deploy satellite systems that must operate reliably in remote and high-risk environments. These are not niche capabilities. They are the same capabilities required to design, produce, and sustain modern defence systems.

Companies like General Dynamics Land Systems are producing advanced armoured vehicles for global markets, while companies like Linamar and Siemens Canada are applying advanced manufacturing and digital systems capabilities directly relevant to defence production.

Emerging players like Kepler Communications and Mission Control are developing satellite communications and mission support technologies with clear defence applications. Alongside a broader network supported through RDII and the NRC, these companies represent a cross-sector industrial system with the capacity to support defence at scale.

With more predictable demand and accessible pathways, Canadian companies can scale domestically, anchoring both capability and talent in Canada. In this way, procurement becomes a central lever for translating industrial capacity into sustained defence readiness.

FROM ALIGNMENT TO EXECUTION

Canada does not lack strategy. The Defence Industrial Strategy and related investments provide a clear direction, linking procurement, industrial capacity, skills, and research.

What Canada lacks is a system that connects these elements in practice. Across the country, businesses, post-secondary institutions, and governments are already building and operating the capabilities that underpin a modern defence ecosystem, but often in parallel rather than in concert.

The opportunity is not to build new capacity from scratch, but to connect what already exists. Doing so will require coordinated action across governments, the Canadian Armed Forces, industry, and post-secondary institutions, to align training with demand, enable talent mobility, and connect procurement to deployment.

BHER is advancing this work through its **BHER: Defence Leadership Table**.

If you're a company or post-secondary institution that wants to help us address talent, training, and coordination challenges in Canada's defence sector, please reach out about BHER membership. These tables will be made up of current and new BHER members.

See more of our **Action Plan Series** and **Thought Leadership.**

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