



FORCE DEVELOPMENT
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Getting Defence Procurement Right

IN A TIME OF GREAT POWER COMPETITION



CONFERENCE OF DEFENCE ASSOCIATIONS INSTITUTE

FORCE DEVELOPMENT

Getting Defence Procurement Right In a Time of Great Power Competition

Roundtable

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Introduction

In recognition of the incredible complexity of sustaining defence capabilities, including timely defence procurement, the CDA Institute has initiated the “Force Development Series,” comprised of events involving a diverse range of subject matter experts and reports as a contribution to the national discussion on defence policy. With the generous support of the Department of National Defence (DND), this fifth roundtable event of the series was held in late March 2024, on the topic of defence procurement in time of a renewed great power competition.

The objective of the event was to conduct, at a high level, a comprehensive assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of the Canadian procurement model while also exploring international best practices, and fostering open conversations amongst experts to generate creative, multi-stakeholder solutions-focused dialogues. The topics covered during the event notably included transparency and accountability, the streamlining of procurement processes, supply chain resilience, the harnessing of emerging technologies, and the promotion of innovation and collaboration within the defence industry, all bearing in mind the background of a renewed great power competition.

This report summarizes the discussions held during the event, providing a comprehensive overview of the key points made by the invited experts. The report aims to promote better understanding and informed debate about the challenges associated with sustaining this critical capability for Canadians. Complying with the Chatham House rules, the report does not attribute any comments to individuals.

Overview

Defence procurement is critical in maintaining operational readiness. In turn, it is that operational readiness that enables armed forces to conduct military deployments either locally or abroad. As it plays an essential role in the capacity of states to resort to their military, defence procurement constitutes an important function in maintaining a battle-ready armed force. Yet, the acquisition of military equipment is, more often than not, far from straightforward. In fact, it is a particularly tedious and multifaceted task. The inherent complexity of the military technology, the multiplicity of the actors involved in the procedures, and the length of the processes are just some of the many aspects that make defence procurement a challenging endeavour.

It is not new that many dimensions of the Canadian defence procurement model are subject to criticism. Even in the wake of the numerous reforms that have happened since the Second World War, some commentators remain concerned about the governance and the accountability of the current system (Auger 2020, 15). Burdened with bureaucratization, the Canadian procurement model has made headlines quite often in past years, with criticisms painting the process as archaic and anachronistic. In times of renewed great power competition, this inability to adapt – or substantially reform itself – is a source of even more stress on the operational readiness of the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF).

Yet, Ottawa is not the sole world capital facing challenges in regards to defence procurement. While each country is subject to its own internal dynamic shaping the function, the heightening of international tensions has brought procurement discussions back to the forefront along with global security issues, prompting a re-examination of current practices. It is against this backdrop that our event took place in March 2024.

This short report provides an overview of the discussions that took place during this hybrid event. It reunited experts from numerous backgrounds and sectors and invited them to share their perspectives on how to face defence procurement challenges in times of renewed great power competition.



Key Takeaways

- The lack of accountability and transparency in the Canadian procurement system limits the streamlining of the processes and the availability of information for industries and allies, which foments a lack of confidence in the system;
- Long-term planning is severely lacking the Canadian defence procurement approach. This needs to be corrected to avoid the use of hardware past obsolescence, which can have significant consequences on the operational readiness of the CAF. However, this will require coordination with long-term funding and timely governmental decision-making to ensure success and relevancy;
- The war in Ukraine exacerbates the precarious nature of defence supply chains. Both industry and governments must monitor systemic shocks to prevent fractures in their procurement processes which would induce increased costs and delays;
- Canada has a highly qualified workforce; it must capitalize on it. Aside from the human factor, it was also suggested that Ottawa should learn from its past experiences in dealing with crisis to innovate on the flexibility of its processes.

What About Defence Procurement?

The Canadian defence procurement model is often in the news, and not necessarily for the right reasons. Indeed, it is frequently the subject of criticism. Whether it's about escalating costs, never-ending delays, or the lack of transparency, it is often said that, in its current format, the Canadian defence procurement model is ill adapted to sustain the needs of the CAF – let alone respond to the rise of geopolitical tensions. But ... why?

In Canada, *Public Services and Procurement Canada* (PSPC) is often seen as having a central role when it comes to defence procurement. Yet, PSPC is far from the only department involved. In fact, while PSPC is responsible for contracting for the acquisition of materiel, it is the *Department of National Defence* (DND) that specifies the requirement, *Innovation, Science and Economic Development Canada* (ISED) that manages the industrial and technological benefits aspects, and *Treasury Board* that approves everything and authorizes the associated expenditures (GoC 2025; GoC 2024). Furthermore, the *Privy Council Office* (PCO) and the *Department of Finance* are also both involved in defence procurement projects. Aside from governmental entities, industry also represent a key stakeholder in the delivery of defence procurement outcomes for the CAF.

This complex, fragmented and decentralized business model has been in place for more than 50 years (Auger 2020, 15). In response to recurring criticisms about its effectiveness and efficiency, in February 2014 Ottawa adopted the “*Defence Procurement Strategy*,” (DPS) in an attempt to improve coordination and management of the defence procurement process. Under the strategy, the federal entities involved were mandated to undertake specific improvements and a more integrated governance framework was established with the stated objective of “delivering the right equipment to the Canadian Armed Forces and the Canadian Coast Guard in a timely manner; leveraging our purchases of defence equipment to create jobs and economic growth in Canada; and streamlining defence procurement processes” (GoC 2025). The strategy, however, was not notably successful in

achieving these objectives and a 2020 study found that, if anything, procurement processes had become increasingly complex and bureaucratic (Auger 2020, i).

The recent Defence Policy update – *Our North, Strong and Free: A Renewed Vision for Canada's Defence* – released by the Canadian government in 2024 also acknowledged a lack of effectiveness and the poor speed of delivery of the current defence procurement system (DND 2024, 20). Yet, it also emphasized that Canada's allies are likewise reflecting on their own procurement practices in order to keep up with the “quickly evolving threats” (DND 2024, 20).

It is with this as a backdrop that the CDA Institute coordinated a Force Development Series discussion on the topic of defence procurement in times of renewed great power competition.



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The Canadian Model – The Focus of Discussions

On March 28, 2024, the event began by examining areas where Canada could improve its defence procurement. This was followed by a discussion of what it does well.

Accountability and Transparency

The lack of a single minister with the authority and resources to make decisions and be held accountable for them, along with a lack of transparency attribut-



ed to the Canadian defence procurement system was flagged by many participants as a real issue. The current approach of sharing various tasks among different governmental entities, while it may have some advantages, increases the number of internal processes for any given project. This was repeatedly echoed by participants, who shared their concerns about the well-documented bureaucratization that heavily burdens the Canadian defence procurement model.

Furthermore, a business model that lacks a single minister responsible for overseeing defence procurement, constitutes a potential accountability risk. With fragmented decision-making and dispersed governance, the chances of having accountability loopholes are heightened. As one participant suggested, procurement projects have to go through numerous ministries, each with their respective structures, authorities and responsibilities.

Some participants argued that adopting a more centralized approach to decision-making could help streamline procurement processes. In particular, attendees stressed the need for a more direct governance structure that can ensure accountability while avoiding bureaucratic inefficiencies that hinder agility and innovation.

Transparency was also a concern for participants, with many criticisms directed at the inherent opacity of the current model, particularly for stakeholders external to the federal government. For example, when compared to the practices of the United States (U.S.), there are noticeable differences in terms

of the accessibility of information related to defence procurement. As was pointed out, the US Department of Defense (DoD) budget provides a comprehensive multi-year plan that is transparent about things like unit costs; although this omits the cost of associated programs, it nevertheless presents a more granular picture of the financial aspect at play for a given defence procurement project. In Canada, there is no such practice. Instead, the defence budget is part of the larger national budget, providing no detailed public breakdown of acquisition plans. Consequently, the publicly accessible data is often outdated – sometimes by many months.

While some have argued that transparency has improved over the years; a lot remains to be done. Participants emphasized the critical need for clear communication channels, standardized reporting mechanisms, and more direct ways to engage with stakeholders. Indeed, these measures were deemed essential by many to promote accountability, trust, and confidence between the actors involved.

As one noted, “transparency is the catalyst of trust, and trust is the best form of renewable energy for collaboration.” All participants recognized that fostering deeper collaboration between the public and private sectors is critical. They emphasized that such collaboration not only facilitate the exchange of ideas and resources, but also enhances the efficiency of procurement processes. For instance, the outcomes of collaborative relationships can positively impact problem-solving abilities and help drive innovation and research and development. However, for these to materialize, concrete measures must be implemented by both government and industry to address the accountability and transparency issues that obstruct collaboration.

Aging Systems and Long-Term Planning

It is no secret that Canada is struggling to replace aging systems in a timely manner. While many projects are delivered on time, DND reported in 2020 that no less than 117 major defence procurement projects experienced delays between January 1, 2016, through December 10, 2019 (Auger 2020, 23). In the meantime, The CAF continued having to cope with deteriorating equipment. Indeed, data from 2024 shows that



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the RCAF has 55% of its equipment not serviceable, the RCN has 54%, and the CA has 46% (Brewster 2024). Against this backdrop, many participants stressed that the CAF is forced to keep major systems – ships, aircraft, tanks – until they die of old age. In turn, the maintenance challenges of aged systems drive up operating costs; despite this being the case, new technologies do not always equal a cost-effective sustainable maintenance either. As one participant pointed out, maintaining older versions of major systems requires more work, and there is a real risk that suppliers involved in the production of a given system will not be involved in its manufacture indefinitely, which can complicate the acquisition of spare parts. Furthermore, fielding outdated materiel comes with its own operational risks. Accordingly, this reinforced the belief amongst attendees that having a clear roadmap outlining a cyclical renewal strategy is crucial for ensuring the timely replacement of equipment.

According to the *First Interim Report on Defence Procurement – Summary of Evidence* published in June 2019, the acquisition cycle of defence equipment in Canada was then averaging 16 years (Mockler, Day and Pratte 2019). Yet, despite clear evidence of process delays the struggle to establish a more structured renewal strategy persists. As one participant declared, a good example of this lack of long-term planning is that all the supply ships of the previous generation expired before the construction of their replacements began. Another is that the replacement fleet of surface combatants that was announced back in 2011, have

yet to begin construction, 13 years later (Castonguay 2024). This means that the RCN will have to deal with aging problems with its existing fleet of frigates (The Canadian Press 2021). Furthermore, the inability to proactively replace aging systems may not only have repercussions at home. Indeed, participants were also vocal about the potential reputational cost among allies who perceive Canada's inability to meet key international commitments.

To address these issues, attendees shared thoughts on the institution of a systemic policy that tackles long-term planning, within which the lifecycles of CAF major systems are to be managed. Indeed, the implementation of a continuous defence procurement cycle providing guidance for the transitions of major systems would ensure a smoother and more organized process. The implementation of this type of planning framework would not only mitigate the operational risks associated with deploying older technology but also positively impact potential partnerships between public and private stakeholders by gradually introducing greater predictability – a factor many identified as missing. To be effective, attendees believed that such a policy should also address obsolescence oversight, lifecycle costing, and encompass a roadmap outlining the renewal strategies. It must also contain a rigorous financial plan to ensure that financial considerations are well integrated within the broader approach.

The delayed replacement of critical assets highlights the need for strategic long-term recapitalization planning and scheduling across the CAF. Maintaining major systems past obsolescence incurs significant costs and operational challenges, all that mixed with the diminishing value for money. Thus, recapitalization investment requires a more focused policy framework within government aimed at enhancing operational efficiency, mitigating obsolescence risks, and ensuring sustainable readiness for future missions, whether at home or abroad.

Keeping Pace

Technological breakthroughs and geopolitical uncertainties continuously underscore the need for flexibility and adaptability. Both require that Canada sustain a defence procurement model that enables the CAF to navigate the ever-evolving tactical and strategic land-



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scape before them.

As many participants pointed out, technological progress is outpacing the current model's capacity to adapt. Consequently, there is a tendency for projects to revert to old requirement strategies due to the complexities inherent in evolving technologies, resulting in inefficiencies and escalating costs. Further, the timelines for industry to successfully integrate new technological advancements into existing weapon systems might be as important as the technology itself. What may be cutting-edge today can swiftly become obsolete or surpassed, diminishing its utility in meeting the operational need.

Acknowledging the extent of this challenge, attendees discussed the importance of having an approach to defence procurement that is flexible and can accommodate future technological breakthroughs. For this to work, it is primordial to benchmark clear metrics of success that define the progress of projects, and should be tailored to the specific acquisition. As one participant noted, this redefinition of success parameters is particularly critical for IT technologies such as software programs.

The integration of modern technologies also requires that the government strike a balance between short-term and long-term goals; a practice that is crucial in managing the expectations of the different stakeholders. As one mentioned, prioritizing speed of delivery as the sole target may result in rushed processes. To keep up the pace, Canada must come up with a framework for transitioning technology with



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both speed and discipline that ensures current operations can continue without disruption.

The war in Ukraine and geopolitical tensions in Europe also have impacts on defence procurement. As one participant stressed, geopolitics is now one of the key factors being looked at by industries when it comes to investment projects; leading to the placement of financial assets in “geopolitically safe” environments. Beyond investment strategies, geopolitics can also significantly shift governments' priorities, often in the blink of an eye. Indeed, it may require swift actions from governments to respond to an immediate emergency. Thus, it is crucial that clear and reliable signals are shared across all the members of the defence community so that priorities are known among all. This is particularly important, since when facing an emergency, speed becomes all too relevant.

Not unrelated to the growing geopolitical uncertainty, attendees also stressed the importance of maintaining the integrity of supply chains. Indeed, they argued that more investments are required to better shield defence procurement against potential disruptions as well as to ensure a continuous flow of defence materials and services. As one participant highlighted, such undertakings are already taking shape, particularly in Europe and Australia. Recent world events, such as the eruptions of two high-intensity conflicts and the global Covid-19 pandemic, have indeed demonstrated how disruptive systemic shocks can be on supply chains. To mitigate the risk, attendees emphasized the importance of diversifying procurement sources and developing enhanced domestic manufacturing capabilities, so that their mutual development reinforces the resilience of supply chains.

In response to the continuous technological out-breaks driven by research and innovation, and the new geopolitical reality that all states must face; Canada must enhance the agility of its procurement processes if it wishes to navigate the challenges ahead. Implementing nuanced success metrics and streamlined communication channels across the entire defence ecosystem would be a step in that direction.

Allies' Practices

Canada is not alone in facing issues with defence



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procurement, and comparing its practices with those of its allies can provide valuable insights for enhancing its own strategies. This is why the FDS event held in March 2024 included participants from various allied nations, such as the UK, Germany, and France. Here follows some of the highlights this conversation.

In the UK, defence tends to be a bipartisan topic. This helps shield defence procurement projects from party politics, even though it may sometimes require that parties seek compromises. Indeed, this approach ensures greater continuity and stability among the policies and commitments made by the different governments, even though projects may still be dismissed in light of escalating costs or fluctuating global dynamics. To make the often-necessary compromises that result from bipartisan agreements, there is a tendency for a more nuanced approach to measuring the “success” of procurement projects. A narrow interpretation of success metrics – such as one focusing solely on the speed of delivery or the adherence to budgets – may cause other relevant considerations to be overlooked when assessing the completion of procurement projects. As for examples, the T-45, the RAF Typhoon, and RAF Tornado, are examples of procurement projects that were not particularly appreciated at times. Yet, they revealed their relevancy in the aftermath of their in-service date. By integrating factors such as operational effectiveness and through-life costs into success metrics, the assessment of procurement practices becomes more nuanced. In essence, the procurement system in the UK is more dynamic than static, emphasizing that it continuously seeks to adapt

itself to changing needs.

In Germany, the *Zeitenwende* – which resulted in the creation of a 100-billion-euro special fund for additional military spending in the years 2022-2026 marked a significant shift with the past 30 years (Puglierin 2024). As it was pointed out, the Russian invasion of Ukraine moved the priorities away from international crisis missions to national and alliance defence. Following the outbreak of the war in Ukraine, adjustments were made to develop more streamlined decision-making processes and to meet more time-sensitive deadlines. Now, “time” is identified as a decisive factor for the defence procurement decisions. This emphasis on speed has been in part concretized by two factors. First, Berlin expressed a greater interest in aligning its capability demands with the current technological limits; which encouraged the acquisition of market available product when possible. Second, Germany capitalized on the legal flexibility existing within the current legislative framework to fast-track projects. This openness to the use of legal easing leverage is evident in the 2023 Defence Policy Guidelines, where it is mentioned that “existing exemption clauses for the Bundeswehr must be applied at all times and all procurement law options to speed up the procedure must be used” (Federal Ministry of Defence 2023, 30). This echoes the adoption in 2022 of the *Bundeswehrbeschaffungsbeschleunigungsgesetz* (BwBBG) – The Federal Armed Forces Procurement Acceleration Act – which had for primary objective to help Germany in its undertaking to speed up processes of defence acquisition (König and al. 2022). Thus,



Berlin's shift on defence procurement appeared to primarily driven by geopolitical factors, and, interestingly, involved utilizing legal innovation to mitigate bottlenecks.

It is true that these countries share a key difference with Canada: they all possess a centralized defence organization specifically dedicated to defence procurement (Auger 2020, 9-10). Apart from that structural difference, they also share a similar 'national will' to make the funding decisions, a decisiveness not unknown to the realities brought forward by the return of war in Europe. Yet, their insights should be welcomed as a valuable opportunity for Canada to reflect on its own practices. Understanding how these nations navigate defence procurement challenges, whether caused by internal or systemic issues, can provide crucial lessons and strategies for improving Canada's own approach.

Don't Throw the Baby Out With the Bathwater

Amidst all that, one could be quickly drawn to the conclusion that all remains to be done. Yet, that is not the case. Canada has strengths, and capitalizing on them can create leverage to better cope with the new reality it faces today.

The composition of a given workforce is often linked to the success of an industry. When it comes to the defence industry, this holds true, particularly since such a market thrives on research and innovation. This places Canada in a favourable position. Indeed, Canada has a high-skilled workforce, and as one attendee noted, the excellence of the Canadian education system, combined with immigration policies, is positioning the country with a comparative advantage in terms of talent availability and expertise.

Second, Canada holds great potential for investments in research and development. In particular, one attendee shared that the country already plays a role in the global defence industry through homegrown innovation, and that role can be further exploited. The country's economy is rich in small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs), which have the potential to strengthen supply chains within the defence industri-

al base with their agility, flexibility and adaptability. Conversely, they represent a challenge in terms of their diversity and the fragmented nature of that part of Canada's economy. Leveraging their potential will require collaborative effort between government and industry, but is worth the effort. For instance, their integration into the broader supply chains would be beneficial to strengthening the resiliency of supply chains. Besides, investment in innovation and infrastructure is predominantly acted by SMEs. Inherently, these companies have a distinct level of agility and flexibility when compared to larger companies, and can enact key roles for the development and dissemination of dual-use technologies that are advantageous to both the general economy and defence.

Third, despite Canada's heavy bureaucratization, there are still opportunities to find leverage within the existing processes. Attendees noted that the government should draw on its past experiences in Afghanistan and Ukraine to innovate beyond standard practices. In these cases, Canada demonstrated that when faced with challenging situations that required immediate actions, it can drop some of its old practices to streamline processes. Echoing the German experience, one of the attendees emphasized that laws in Canada also provide sufficient room for innovative solutions, especially if we capitalized on reflecting from practices that occur during emergency situations.



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Conclusion

Often criticized, the Canadian defence procurement model has numerous issues. Continuous delays, cost overruns, institutional opacity, lack of flexibility, the current system is frequently flagged as broken. However, despite its weaknesses, this does not mean that the entire system must be discarded. When taken collectively and at face value, the views and perspectives of attendees suggest that some of the most critical aspects that require attention, and equally important, dimensions that could serve as leverage to optimize the current framework.



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