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What's a policy without a strategy?

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Canada is waiting for a defence policy update (DPU). The current policy [Strong, Secure, Engaged](#) was released in June 2017. Since then, the world has changed. Russia has invaded Ukraine for the second time and violent extremism, SSE's preoccupation, seems outdated.

Canada releases defence policies, not strategies. The difference is more than semantics. [As Martin Neill and his colleagues note](#), policies are political documents that set expectations and priorities, but strategies answer *how* challenges will be addressed. Policies come first, strategies second. Policies should change with governments but strategies should be released more frequently, driven by missions and capabilities that are, preferably, nonpartisan.

The United States is legally mandated to release a defense strategy every four years and they release both a classified and unclassified version. Canada, on the other hand, has no such requirements. Prior to 2017, the last defence policy was penned in [2008 under Harper](#). And absent a foreign and/or national security policies (the last ones were penned in [2005](#) and [2004](#) respectively), the defence policy strays into other areas which might explain why SSE is the longest defence policy (118 pages) of all of Canada's allies.

Does Canada need a strategy to tackle the challenges faced by Canada and the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF)? Does SSE need a political update or solutions to survive a changed world environment? Canada needs both, but the more pressing need is for a defence strategy to deal with the myriad challenges facing the CAF. Policies often involve [public consultations](#) as does the DPU. Canadians have been asked their opinions on everything from adapting capabilities for the CAF to upgrading continental and Arctic defences. But these questions confuse policy with strategy. Canadians can comment on the percentage of their tax dollars they feel defence deserves, but how best to use those monies to defend Canada and allies requires a strategy.

Geopolitically, the world is more contested. The United States has dubbed Russia [a persistent and proximate threat](#) for North America while [China is the pacing threat internationally](#). SSE lacks a threat analysis. Absent one, does Canada assume the United States' threat analysis? What about climate change? A strategy would ensure that the military threats to Canada are named and a corresponding plan (such as [Australia's strategy of denial](#)) to deter threats is outlined. National interests (defence of Canada, North America and support to overseas allies) are front and centre in strategies. Policies, on the other hand include the management framework, budget and

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personnel targets and often ambitious capital announcements. This is not particular to the Trudeau government. All of the past defence policies have these three things in common: Mulroney’s famous promise to purchase “ten to twelve” nuclear-powered submarines in [his 1987 defence policy](#) was dropped when the Berlin Wall fell two years later. [Chrétien’s 1994 defence policy](#) froze [defence spending during a period of recession](#). Harper’s promised Nanisivik naval port is still not operational. Without a strategy, Canada will only be able to admire the challenges, not tackle them.