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The Past, Present and Future of Academic Engagement with the Canadian Armed Forces

by Stephen M. Saideman
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POLICY UPDATE

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One of the big surprises in the *Strong, Secure, Engaged (SSE)* defence review document has been a commitment to improve engagement between the Department of National Defence (DND), the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) and the academic community. The new \$4.5 million annual commitment represents a major sea change from the previous funding of roughly \$500,000 for the Defence Engagement Program (DEP). The DEP, in turn, was what was left of DND's engagement after the death of the Security and Defence Forum (SDF). It has funded mostly workshops and conferences that address DND's priorities within a calendar year. We do not yet know how the new money will be spent, although there has been a call for proposals for a proto-network to develop a better idea of where to go from here. The good news is that a group of defence scholars and scientists has been attempting over the past five years to build a replacement to the SDF program – the Canadian Defence and Security Network (CDSN).¹ In this essay, I will discuss the need for more systematic engagement between the various parts of the Canadian defence community, what the CDSN is and where it fits in, and where the CDSN stands now.

There is much expertise on a variety of defence issues – personnel, procurement, threats and operations – across Canada outside of the military and outside of DND. A lot of it lies in universities, where scholars have spent much effort to study the Canadian Armed Forces as well as those elsewhere. They have much data, many methods and have much less at stake than those in DND, so they can be more dispassionate. Yet, communicating this expertise is fraught. The academics work at a different pace than the military, they often do not know what questions various defence agencies are examining, and they often do not understand the language of the military. CAF officers understand the need for more information, for outside eyes and for feedback, but often do not have the time to engage the academics and frequently see the academics as lacking expertise. The common denominator is that these two communities both believe that more knowledge is a good thing and see the advantages of working with their counterparts, but the challenge is mostly how to communicate with each other.

The SDF funded 13 centres across Canada to foster research on defence issues. Along with funding of graduate students, this program helped create a generation of defence scholars. However, interaction with the CAF and various DND agencies like Defence Research and Development Canada (DRDC) was inconsistent. Moreover, there was considerable variation among the research centres in their focus on defence issues. The centres did foster outreach beyond the academic community to the students and communities where they existed, but they tended not to interact much with each other. Ultimately, DND officials killed SDF because they did not value the return on their investment.

The Defence Policy Review process was quite revealing in a number of ways. The official and unofficial meetings related to the review brought together many of the individuals who had worked in or were trained by the various SDF centres, so the meetings served as reunions. The

¹ To be clear, I have been leading the CDSN effort over the past five years.



conversations revealed how disconnected these scholars were from each other, demonstrating that there was both significant duplication in research efforts and less cumulation than one would have hoped. The meetings also revealed that the Canadian defence community is aging and is fairly homogenous, making it clear that more effort is needed to foster the next generation, one that is more diverse and representative. The various meetings and documents submitted to DND also demonstrated that many had a strong desire for more engagement with the CAF. It was also clear that the Canadian public lacks knowledge of the CAF and a key reason has been the absence of linkages between the CAF and the academic community. The latter served as a bridge with the public.

Those drafting *SSE* realized the importance of bridging the various gaps – among academics, between academics and government agencies, between these actors and those in civil society – so that *SSE* makes a commitment to fund collaborative networks of defence experts. The question is how to do that, as DND has experience in funding research centres but not organizing networks. This is where, hopefully, the CDSN comes in. Over the past five years, a group of academics at civilian and military institutions along with defence scientists have been organizing grant applications aimed at funding activities that would connect the different pieces of the Canadian defence community. The effort to apply has helped to foster better connections between roughly 100 academics at Carleton, Queen's, University of Ottawa, CIRRIQC, Manitoba, Calgary, Simon Fraser and elsewhere with the Canadian Forces College, the Royal Military College, Defence Research Development Canada, OpenCanada, the Canadian Global Affairs Institute, the Conference of Defence Associations Institute, CANADADEM, Women in International Security-Canada, NATO Defence College, the U.S. Army War College, Nanos and a host of other actors.

As the CDSN has been working on developing a network for several years, it was in a good position to apply for the DND's proto-network effort. The team has aimed to build a comprehensive and inclusive network that brings together scholars, defence scientists, policy-makers and civil society organizations that are interested in defence procurement, personnel issues, operations, civil-military relations and/or security concerns via a series of network activities. These efforts are aimed at producing policy-relevant knowledge for government, connecting the various elements of the Canadian defence community and fostering the next generation. We hope to move forward the frustrating conversations relating to defence procurement, the challenges of recruitment and retention, and assessing the future operations that the civilians will ask the CAF to do.

The CDSN has proposed a variety of activities to both build the community and provide insights for government: constructing a year-long series of meetings and workshops advancing specific research agendas; multiple summer training opportunities for advanced graduate students and junior scholars; exchanges at all levels (Carleton has already begun an officer exchange program with Special Operations Forces Command); bridging the efforts by the partners via capstone seminars that bring together the best research on particular themes; systematic outreach using both traditional and social media, and more.



The CDSN's immediate fate is now in DEP's hands.² As indicated above, the effort has already paid off, as we defence academics are better connected now than perhaps ever and at least since the heyday of SDF, and we are also better networked with CFC, DRDC, the CAF and many non-government organizations. Whatever form the DEP efforts take, they represent a recognition that Canadian defence policy is better off if the entire defence community is engaged and connected, and that is progress.

² By the time this is published, the DEP probably will have decided the winner of the proto-network competition.

► About the Author

Stephen Saideman holds the Paterson Chair in International Affairs at Carleton University's Norman Paterson School of International Affairs, and is a Fellow at the Canadian Global Affairs Institute. His research interests are in the fields of international security, comparative foreign policy, civil-military relations, and ethnic conflict.

Before joining Carleton University, Prof. Saideman was Canada Research Chair in International Security and Ethnic Conflict at McGill University. Prior to that, Prof. Saideman spent 2001-2002 on the U.S. Joint Staff working in the Strategic Planning and Policy Directorate as part of a Council on Foreign Relations International Affairs Fellowship. He has also taught at Texas Tech University and the University of Vermont.

He has written *The Ties That Divide: Ethnic Politics, Foreign Policy and International Conflict*; *For Kin or Country: Xenophobia, Nationalism and War* (with R. William Ayres); *NATO in Afghanistan: Fighting Together, Fighting Alone* (with David Auerswald); and *Adapting in the Dust: Learning Lessons from Canada's War in Afghanistan*. He has written on nationalism, ethnic conflict, civil war, and civil-military relations in leading academic journals, including *International Organization* and *International Studies Quarterly*.

Professor Saideman writes online at OpenCanada.org, *Political Violence at a Glance*, *Duck of Minerva* and his own site (saideman.blogspot.com). He also tweets too much at [@smsaideman](https://twitter.com/smsaideman). He has also appeared in more traditional media (newspapers, television and radio) in Canada and the U.S.

He holds a Ph.D. from the University of California, San Diego, which is where he also earned his M.A. He received his B.A. from Oberlin College.

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