

Making Waves

Is 'Maritime' Still in the Future of Maritime Air?

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The decision by the government of Canada to withdraw the CF-18 Hornets from *Operation Impact* (Air Task Force - Iraq) met with considerable debate within the Canadian defence community. What has provoked much less debate is the equally significant decision to leave two CP-140M Aurora aircraft in theatre along with a CC-150T Polaris tanker. This article will examine this decision and how it may presage decisions with respect to 'Maritime Air' in the Defence Review.

In one respect, the decision to leave the Auroras in theatre can be viewed as a token contribution to the Middle East Stabilization Force – the multinational coalition intended to halt and degrade the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). In this sense, a decision to stay is merely another illustration of the minimalist principle of Canadian participation in an alliance. Indeed, Dr. Joel Sokolsky opined that instead of asking “How much is enough?” Canada’s political leaders phrased the question as “How much is just enough?”¹

In another respect, the decision to leave the Auroras in theatre principally to conduct intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR) missions reflects the hard reality that there can never be enough intelligence. This is an age-old challenge and the modern-day Nelsons out there will decry their lack of surveillance assets as much as Nelson begged for more frigates.²

I would argue, however, that the decision to leave two Auroras in theatre as part of *Operation Impact* reflects the changing nature of Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) operations and should be reflected in the Defence Review. Of course, the impressive ISR capability of this platform makes such a decision very easy. (Readers of this journal will certainly be aware of the updated Auroras’ capabilities as described by Colonel Iain Huddleston in the Spring 2015 issue of *Canadian Naval Review*.³) The decision to equip the Aurora with an overland-capable synthetic aperture radar (SAR) along with an accompanying real-time data link reflects well on the foresight of the Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF) operational and procurement staffs in National Defence Headquarters as well as the competence of the Canadian aviation industry. That this was accomplished in a time of reduced budgets is even more impressive.

But, and there is always a but, the deployment of two CP-140M Auroras to *Operation Impact* means that there are two less airframes available for operational (Force Employment) tasking in the traditional deep ocean preserve of maritime aviation. When you consider that two aircraft in theatre necessitate up to six airframes to meet the requirement, the impact on a fleet of only 14 aircraft is brought out in stark relief. Any offsetting reduction in training (Force Generation) might be appealing in the short term but should be rejected out of hand as it would have disastrous effects downstream.

Turning now to the rotary wing side of maritime air, while it is late and still will not achieve its full operational capability for months to come, the CH-148 Cyclone is at some point going to replace the Sea King helicopters on Royal Canadian Navy (RCN) ships. It is currently intended that the Cyclone will capitalize on the work carried out on the Auroras, especially in the area of overland ISR. Once this capability materializes, it is likely that, as in the case of the Sea Kings in and over Somalia during *Operation Deliverance* in the early 1990s, Cyclones could be operated either from ashore or from platforms in littoral waters to provide ISR support to ground forces.

It is critical, therefore, that the Defence Review address where and how the CAF are to be employed in the future. Will the government decide to revert to more traditional concepts of alliance warfare or will there be more operations like *Operation Impact*? Whatever the decision, it will have a significant bearing on the future employment of the Auroras and the Cyclones.



Credit: Op Impact, DND
An aircraft technician from Air Task Force – Iraq marshals a CP-140 Aurora aircraft into Camp Canada in Kuwait during *Operation Impact*, December 2015.

If I were to hazard a guess, I’d guess that there will be many more *Impact* types of operations in the future and an accompanying call for the overland ISR capabilities that both the Aurora and Cyclone possess. There will, however, be an equal pull for both platforms to return to their traditional roles, especially the Aurora. As a recent news release noted, the US Navy is redeploying its P-8 maritime patrol aircraft to its Cold War base in Keflavik, Iceland, to counter Russian submarine activity. And keen observers will have noted that Auroras have been deployed to the United Kingdom to assist the Royal Air Force/Royal Navy in their maritime surveillance operations as a result of an ill-advised decision by the British government to cancel the refit of the British maritime patrol aircraft fleet.

Is there a solution to alleviate the burden on the already stretched maritime air fleets? Possibly, but it would require



further capital expenditure and will pose a moderate to high technological/implementation risk.

There has been a longstanding project on the books to acquire unmanned aerial systems (UAS) for the CAF. However, Project Joint Uninhabited Surveillance and Target Acquisition System (JUSTAS) has yet to emerge from the procurement swamp for a variety of reasons – not the least of which is the lack of a strong sponsor, always a hazard for a ‘joint’ project. Furthermore, an agreed statement of requirement has yet to emerge and the recent musings by the Chief of the Defence Staff regarding whether such UAS platforms should be armed indicate that there is still a debate ongoing inside National Defence Headquarters.

A decision to acquire one of the several unarmed Medium Altitude Long Endurance (MALE) UAS platforms currently available would go a long way to free up the Auroras for non-traditional operations such as *Operation Impact*. But a word of caution, this is a new capability and will not be cheap to acquire either in terms of equipment or personnel.

In the case of the Cyclones, UASs may also provide at least part of the answer. The RCN has operated small UASs borrowed from the army to provide short-range aviation support in the absence of Sea King helicopter detachments. In the event that *Operation Deliverance*-type operations occur again, it is highly likely that there will be a drawdown of ship-based Cyclones to meet a requirement for the support of ground forces ashore. This will leave operational RCN ships without an aviation capability unless a dedicated UAS project is undertaken in the immediate future.

So the challenge for the drafters of the Defence Review is to choose a path to the future for the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF). Whatever path is chosen will have an important impact on maritime air forces.

Returning to a Cold War paradigm of deep-ocean anti-submarine operations within an alliance framework is well within the capability of the current and projected aircraft fleets although there will be limited flexibility due to the low numbers of platforms. Given the nature of recent operations by the CAF, however, this is unlikely to materialize.

What is far more likely to occur is that future operations will place a high priority on the overland ISR capabilities of both maritime air fleets. If projects such as JUSTAS are funded and fielded in the near future, unmanned aerial systems can pick up the deep-ocean and coastal surveillance of the approaches to North America. Without JUSTAS, the difficult becomes impossible.

On the rotary-wing side, operations such as *Operation Deliverance* where helicopters provided a host of functions to ground forces ashore from a supply ship/oiler-type platform are more than likely to materialize. In this event, helicopters from

operational ships will be retasked and there do not appear to be any UAS contenders available to fill the aviation gap for the frigates of the surface fleet.

All in all, the Defence Review will have a profound impact on the way that maritime air forces are employed in the future and, as argued here, there may be less and less ‘maritime’ in maritime air. 🍷

Notes

1. See Joel J. Sokolsky “Realism Canadian Style: National Security Policy and the Chrétien Legacy,” Institute for Research on Public Policy, *Policy Matters*, Vol. 5, No. 2 (June 2004).
2. “Was I to die this moment, ‘Want of Frigates’ would be found stamped on my heart,” Horatio Nelson to Earl Spencer 9 August 1798, quoted in www.wtj.com/archives/nelson/1798_08b.htm.
3. Colonel Iain Huddleston, “Changing with the Times: The Evolution of Canada’s CP-140 Aurora,” *Canadian Naval Review*, Vol. 11, No. 1 (Spring 2015), pp. 10-15.

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