



Our Voice Matters

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Canadians have the good fortune of living in the northern half of a continent surrounded by vast oceans with a friendly neighbour to the south. Over the last decades of the 20th century the biggest threat to Canada was the fallout of a Cold War nuclear exchange delivered from the oceans, bombers, or land-based ballistic missiles. The risk of invasion from Soviet forces was non-existent; however, the risk to the reinforcement of European allies as a consequence of Soviet invasion was real, given the character of the Soviet fleet.

But the Cold War is over and this threat has dissipated so why bother having a navy? Canadians need to ask this question within the broader context of what role they want Canada to play in developing and maintaining a stable interconnected world where local armed conflicts are prevented from spreading to regional or worldwide conflict.

Let's not kid ourselves, Canada does not have the means or the inclination to be one of the world's policemen. However, Canada does want its voice to be heard and heeded in the United Nations, NATO and other security bodies. If it is to be taken seriously, it needs to offer the Canadian perspective, while demonstrating tangible involvement and commitment to resolving the conflicts.

Canada can be insular with a navy designed to patrol its vast ocean borders. Or it can be outward looking and have a modern but modest general purpose navy capable of participating with like-minded allies to bring an effect from the sea in areas of conflict.

The United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) provides the overarching framework for Canada to regulate, safeguard and responsibly exploit both the living and mineral resources of the ocean approaches to the exclusion of other states. However, notwithstanding the UNCLOS framework, there continue to be challenges to these rights, most recently in the Arctic but historically on both coasts including the Grand Banks, Georges Bank, the Gulf of St Lawrence, the Beaufort Sea and the Dixon Entrance. The current build of Arctic Offshore Patrol Ships (AOPS) will help provide an appropriate constabulary response to future challenges, allowing Canada to exercise sovereignty consistent with UNCLOS and international agreements.

But the real strategic challenge to the well-being of Canadians is a breakdown in the world order as a result of armed conflict. In a multipolar world regional powers and non-state actors have continued to use armed force to pursue their agendas. States such as Russia (Georgia, Crimea and the Ukraine), China (East and South China Seas) and North Korea (nuclear weapons and ballistic missile tests) use direct and indirect military force, or the threat of it, to destabilize and bend regions to their wills. The Middle East and North Africa (Israel (Palestine), Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, Libya, Somalia and Yemen) continue to be a hotbed of conflict with regional powers and non-state actors (some as proxies to regional powers) either directly or indirectly using armed force for their own purposes. Many parts of Africa continue to suffer under despots and armed rebel conflict. Thousands of people have lost their lives and millions have been displaced. The world is not a safe place for many.

Experience shows that humanitarian aid works best if there is an overarching security framework. Peacekeeping works where



Credit: Rear Admiral John Newton

HMCS Windsor and Canadian Special Operations Forces conduct final preparations for deployment to European waters, September 2015.

the warring factions have agreed to be separated. Economic sanctions work against states that have a developed economy and where the ruling classes are concerned about maintaining control and avoiding a civil war (North Korea is a blatant outlier). While direct armed interventions by external actors have their limitations, they can provide some stability as a political compromise is pursued. More importantly, they can contain the spread of the conflict.

Political rhetoric that posits that humanitarian aid is the only solution to the multiple conflicts in the world ignores the power dynamics that exist and the wide availability of arms. The genocide in Rwanda demonstrates that weapons don't have to be sophisticated to be deadly.

An attractive feature of interventions with navies in conflict areas is that their effect can be nuanced and graduated. They can be committed and recalled readily. They can be used in a graduated response ranging from: simple presence (current NATO operations in the Black Sea); embargo/economic sanctions (Somalia, Yemen, Syria, Iraq, Gaza Strip); protection of commercial and World Food Organization shipping (against Somali and Straits of Malacca pirates); and naval forces can conduct operations from sea control to the landing and support of land and air forces (Afghanistan, Yemen, Russian bombardment of Syria from the Caspian Sea). The Canadian navy has participated in some of these mission sets in the recent past.

To some degree the question boils down to what role Canada wants to play in maintaining economic and political stability in the world and at what cost. Whether measured in terms of the level of humanitarian aid or the controlled use of armed forces, Canada has lagged behind most of its allies of comparable economic capability. The reason for this may simply be the good fortune that conflicts are not at its doorstep. Canadians should recognize that this influences their world view. However, they should also recognize that Canadian pronouncements on how the world should work will fall on deaf ears to those faced with conflict in their region if Canada does little to help deal with their existential threats.

The Canadian navy is modest, consisting of a dozen recently modernized general purpose frigates, an obsolescent destroyer, four submarines and a dozen general purpose but limited coastal patrol vessels. The modernization of the *Halifax*-class frigates will allow them to be effective into late in the next decade. The remaining *Iroquois*-class destroyer cannot be modernized. The same is true of the *Protecteur*-class replenishment ships which have been paid off.

Although a modern warship's hull, main and auxiliary machinery have a useful life of approximately 30 years, naval weapon and sensor systems have a useful life of about 15 years before they become difficult to support, unreliable and less capable of dealing with current threats. In addition, the time required to plan for, identify the resources required and schedule and build modern warships is measured not in years but in decades. Therefore, decisions need to be made today as

to what the Canadian navy will look like in the future as the *Halifax*-class frigates and the submarines come to the end of their useful lives.

This is ultimately a political decision reflecting Canadian values and preferences. The National Shipbuilding Procurement Strategy (NSPS) provides a rationale for building both warships and government ships in Canada economically. The Arctic Offshore Patrol Ships are the first class of warships being built under this strategy and will provide a test case as to whether the strategy has real merit. The next challenge is determining when, with what and how to replace the current frigates, destroyers and submarines.

Part of the current national debate centres on the likely cost of these replacements and, as a consequence, the numbers of hulls that can be built and their capabilities. This is not an easy discussion since any real capability will have a significant cost. Given that armed conflict is unlikely to disappear, the question returns to what role Canada wants to play in attempting to lessen the severity of these conflicts and in having its voice heard. In the building of a world order that is peaceful and where Canadian values can be advanced, some meaningful expenditure will be required.

An evolution of the capabilities inherent in the current Canadian patrol frigates or those in similar European navies would be a good place to start in looking for a Canadian-built replacement fleet. Pursuit of sophisticated air defence and command and control destroyers or cruisers would require too much of a cost tradeoff, resulting in too few numbers to be able to respond to national and international requirements. The enduring Canadian navy strategy of a modest general purpose combat capable fleet remains an achievable Canadian compromise. 🍷

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