

## **House Standing Committee on National Defence**

Notes for Opening Remarks by Vice Admiral Drew Robertson (ret'd)

18 October 2016

- Many thanks for the opportunity for the Naval Association of Canada to appear at the start of your consideration of the maritime defence of Canada.
- I'll deal with the strategic question of what navy Canada will have on our present course, and then turn over to my colleagues.

### ***Defence of Canada – Introduction***

- For all navies, there is no legal and little operational difference between the high seas that start just 22 km off our coastline, and those same international waters thousands of kilometers away in the approaches to a foreign coastline on another continent.
- The RCN responds to and deters other powers in our home waters, but the Government has also repeatedly used the RCN to respond wherever our national interests are challenged, rather than wait for the challenge to arrive off our coasts.
- For the past few years that has meant ships, submarines and aircraft operating in the Eastern Atlantic, and the Black, Mediterranean or Baltic seas to deter Russian aggression – using capabilities at sea to demonstrate the Alliance's will to defend our allies, and ourselves.
- Governments have ordered such deployments because supporting the international order has produced the peace and security on which our trade and prosperity depend. Such operations have been the core business on which our Governments have dispatched the RCN abroad, amounting to dozens of deployments globally by our ships, submarines and aircraft, and task groups in the last 20 years, even while the fleet at home secured our sovereignty.
- Notwithstanding an unbroken record of success on operations at home and worldwide, the RCN's capabilities and capacities have eroded steadily over the past 20 years, incrementally but increasingly compromising its ability to defend Canada or to act as a force for good abroad.
- I'd like now to describe where this could lead and the strategic risks governments and the country will face.

### ***Policy, Resources & Strategic Risks Today***

- There has been progress recently. The frigates, now well past mid-life, have been successfully modernized, and our submarines are operational.
- Further, the National Shipbuilding Strategy is an important undertaking of considerable promise. The question isn't whether Canada will successfully build warships: we always have. The question is whether their numbers and capabilities will be adequate to the rising challenges.

- But for the Naval Association, the regrettable observation is that, over the last 20 years a succession of previous governments and eight parliaments have been unable to sustainably resource Defence. The most clear sign of this has been that this G7 nation—with all its maritime interests at home and abroad—has seen its replenishment ships and its destroyers age into their mid-forties before being forced out of commission—not merely without relief, but without governments having even entered into contracts to build their replacements.
- The RCN’s successes of the last 20 years were due to investments in the fighting fleets that defend Canada made decades before. Here I include our submarines, frigates, destroyers and maritime patrol aircraft – the youngest of which is already over 20 years of age.
- But the ability of this government and those that follow to live off these legacy investments is rapidly coming to a close, even as the strategic risks it has had to assume deepens.
- What are those risks? Beyond having fewer ships for our defence:
  - Canada no longer has the ability to independently control events at sea due to the loss of its task group air defence capability.
  - Canada no longer has the ability to independently sustain deployed task group operations and must rely on others for at-sea refuelling and logistics support, even in home waters,
  - Consequently, Canada is unlikely to be able to conduct a prolonged multi-rotation response to international events, nor is it likely to be offered the significant international leadership opportunities at sea that such a response enables, particularly in complex operations, of the kind we’ve undertaken repeatedly, including after 9/11 supporting our American allies for several years.

### ***Looking Ahead***

- Looking ahead, on the present course, future governments face greater reductions and rising risks.
- Today’s RCN fighting fleet of submarines and surface combatants is already smaller than research has shown required to meet enduring policy outcomes – such as maintaining our sovereignty and contributing to international peace and security.
- Yet, as the PBO and others have noted, the CAF is unsustainable over the coming decade, likely to an amount in the tens of billions of dollars. So, plans aimed at restoring the fighting fleet’s capacity, including those to extend the life of Canada’s four highly capable *Victoria*-class submarines into the mid-2030s, and replace them with a new submarine capability, as well to replace as our *Aurora* Maritime Patrol aircraft, are at not just in jeopardy, they are headed hard aground.
- At current budget levels, you can anticipate the RCN’s fighting fleet being further reduced over the coming 15 years.
  - Reduced eventually toward a figure in the press of just 9 surface combatants (a 40% cut from the 15 of just two years ago),

- while the submarines and the RCAF's maritime patrol aircraft will not likely be affordable, and will not be replaced.
- Such changes would each compound the risks I cited earlier by significantly eroding the maritime capabilities and capacities required to contribute meaningfully to continental or international operations.
  - While for decades the government has often had major warships deployed in two separate theatres, that would no longer be sustainable with a smaller fleet
  - But most importantly, such a force would not be suitable or adequate for the vast challenge of defending our three-ocean home waters
- The Naval Association believes that this much smaller and unbalanced future force would consequently not be adequate to national need, especially given the rapid changes underway in the global maritime order:
  - As nations throughout the world, but especially Russia and China, continue to narrow or close the technological gaps that western navies have enjoyed for decades and make significant and disproportionate investments in maritime forces, particularly in the Asia-Pacific
  - As great state cooperation continues to give way to competition and confrontation at the expense of the rules-based international order, especially at sea and most notably in the South and East China Seas, and finally,
  - As Canada's third and largest, but least accessible and most fragile, ocean space, opens to commercial shipping and resource extraction, and as the RCN secures our sovereignty in a time of significant nation-building in the Arctic.

### ***Conclusions & Recommendations***

- For the Naval Association, the success of the Defence Policy Review depends on bringing spending levels into balance over the medium-long term with the defence outcomes governments expect. That will require fundamental adjustments upwards or downwards to either or both. The Naval Association would argue, as I have, that the new strategic environment will require increased investment in defence to achieve what governments expect of the CAF, rather than less.
- In making such investments, the Naval Association would observe that in addition to securing Canada's defence, there is no better insurance against strategic risk and unforeseen global shocks than a balanced, multi-purpose and combat-capable maritime force.
- But the Naval Association also believes that this Defence Policy Review presents a moment of strategic opportunity—an opportunity to not only bring defence outcomes and resources into an urgently needed balance—but to allow the CAF to be restructured for the challenges of this century. The force structure of the 20<sup>th</sup> century should be reshaped for the challenges of the decades ahead.

- Such strategy-driven measures will take vision, courage and commitment, and effort over many years. But the result will be a CAF better prepared to defend Canada at home and act as a force for good abroad.
- Thank you for your interest and support for the RCN, and the CAF more broadly.