



CANADIAN NAVAL TASK GROUPS

If you've read Briefing Note #36, you will know that the Royal Canadian Navy (RCN) works closely with its allies and stresses its ability to operate seamlessly (be 'interoperable') with them. But what about RCN ships operating together as a unit? There is a need for Canada both to operate with allies *and* to operate alone if necessary. This is where the concept of a Canadian task group comes in. The concept is not unique to Canada and is not new – navy ships have been operating together since navies have existed.

RCN strategic documents – over many years – have called for a navy that can be self-sustained and able to act autonomously if necessary. Task groups are an element of this. According to *Strong, Secure, Engaged: Canada's Defence Policy*, "[t]he Naval Task Group is the core Royal Canadian Navy operating concept."¹ (This is not new – the 1994 White Paper on Defence says the RCN should have a naval task group on each coast.) Government policy requires the RCN to maintain a high-readiness naval task group "whose ultimate purpose is to provide Canada with an independent and sovereign ability to control events at sea."²

So what exactly is a task group? According to *Leadmark 2050*, a naval task group is "a tactically self sufficient grouping of ships, aircraft and submarines whose sensors and weapons are integrated into a highly cohesive warfighting whole."³ The task group concept is within Canadian, American and NATO doctrine.

Why would we want a task group? Task groups are flexible instruments. They can combine different naval units with different capabilities to match the assignment given to them by government. In this, they become greater than the sum of their parts and can make a navy more cost-effective because not *all* ships need *all* capabilities. A task group can enhance surveillance and intelligence-gathering abilities by combining sub-surface, surface and aircraft into a common operating picture (or a recognized maritime picture). The network of assets in the task group will add together information which allows all members to "see" what each of them sees individually, from the ocean depths to near space, and throughout the electromagnetic and acoustic spectrums."⁴ And as a task group joins a task force, this picture can come from connections with allied networks as well as from the shore.

A task group is also self-contained. Part of this relates the ability of the group to defend itself, and other units under its control, from a variety of threats.⁵ Unlike the forces of the army and air force, a naval task group does not require shore-based facilities to be effective. The task group can also be withdrawn or augmented as the mission changes. And because the RCN is mandated to have some ships at high readiness at all times, a task group can be ready to deploy in a matter of days. This gives the government the ability to respond quickly to a crisis.

¹ Government of Canada, *Strong, Secure, Engaged: Canada's Defence Policy*, Ottawa, 2017, p. 35.

² Royal Canadian Navy, *Leadmark 2050: Canada in a New Maritime World*, 2016, p. 43.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 44.

⁵ These threats could include traditional attacks by other state forces on, over and under the sea, and include bullets, bombs, missiles, torpedoes. They could also include attacks by non-state forces using unconventional means – e.g., ramming a warship with an explosive-laden speedboat. And threats now also include electronic, electro-optical, acoustic, electro-magnetic pulse and information attack.

Task groups can provide a medium-sized navy like the RCN with versatile ability to influence other countries via naval diplomacy. A task group often forms part of a larger task force led by a Combined Joint Task Force Commander. A Canadian task group can affect task force operations and offer a measure of sovereignty protection and influence as Canadian ships remain under Canadian command, and commanders have a say in how RCN forces are used which might not be the case if a single warship joins a task force.

What would a Canadian task group look like? A task group is made up of several elements: warships, of course, but also a command and control element – including the Commander of the task group (CTG) – and a support element. The ships that are assigned will differ depending on the mission. As envisioned by *SSE*, “[c]omposed of up to four surface combatants and a joint support ship, and supplemented where warranted by a submarine, it brings with it the full breadth of combat capability, force enablers, specialized teams, maritime helicopters, and remotely piloted systems.”⁶ A Canadian task group could be composed of a combination of frigates, submarines, Maritime Coastal Defence Vessels (MCDVs), helicopters and Maritime Patrol Aircraft (MPA). In the future, the Arctic Offshore Patrol Ships (AOPS), the Joint Support Ships (JSS) and the Canadian Surface Combatants (CSCs) will be incorporated into task groups.

According to *Leadmark 2050*, a future Canadian naval task group will consist of:

- One Canadian Surface Combatant (CSC), once available, with a commander and staff. Until the CSCs are built, command and control functions are performed by the *Halifax*-class frigates, four of which have an enhanced command package to serve in a flagship capacity.
- Two or three *Halifax*-class frigates.
- One support ship.
- Several CH-148 Cyclone maritime helicopters, distributed across the task group, to permit aircraft to be simultaneously airborne for round-the-clock operations when required.
- One *Victoria*-class submarine, depending on the assessed needs of the mission.⁷

Has the RCN formed task groups and conducted missions? Yes. Here are examples of high-profile Canadian task group operations:

- *Operation Friction* – 1991, HMC Ships *Athabaskan*, *Terra Nova* and *Protecteur*, with five helicopters, were sent to the Persian Gulf to assist in the UN-mandated blockade of Iraq after its invasion of Kuwait. This was part of a larger task force led by the United States to remove Iraqi forces from Kuwait.
- *Operation Unison* – 2005, in response to Hurricane Katrina, Canada deployed three RCN ships – HMC Ships *Athabaskan*, *Toronto*, *Ville de Quebec*, plus one CCG ship (*Sir William Alexander*), a dive team and a boat crew. There was no supply ship since HMCS *Preserver* was not available. The Canadian task group joined the larger US-led task force
- *Operation Hestia* – 2010, in response to an earthquake in Haiti, Canada sent two ships, HMC Ships *Athabaskan* and *Halifax*, plus helicopters and the Disaster Assistance Response Team as part of Joint Task Force Haiti which also involved the Canadian Army and representatives from the Department of Foreign Affairs and non-governmental organizations.
- *Operation Podium* – 2010, this was the Canadian Forces’ contribution in support of the

⁶ *Strong, Secure, Engaged*, p. 35.

⁷ Maritime patrol aircraft (MPA) are not elements of the naval task group, as they are normally separately tasked to operate with a task group by a supporting commander ashore. *Leadmark 2050*, p. 43.

RCMP-led Integrated Security Unit to the security of the Vancouver 2010 Olympic and Paralympic Winter Games. It included RCAF assets (in conjunction with NORAD) and an RCN task group.

RCN task groups have undertaken a variety of missions including maritime interdiction, ship escort, sea control/sea denial, enforcement of sanctions, disaster relief and support of forces ashore.

RCN personnel have regularly commanded international naval forces. In some cases, a Canadian task group participates in an international task force with a Canadian Task Force Commander. This happened in the Gulf War in 1991 and in operations in the Middle East after 9/11. As well, Canadians regularly lead NATO task forces.

Questions about the Future

A key element of a task group is the ability to replenish at sea. A task group must be able to sustain itself by arming, fuelling, making basic repairs, supplying (food, water, spare parts) and providing health support to personnel. This is the role of a support ship. Without a support ship, warships cannot sustain themselves. This has been a weakness of the RCN for several years as the supply ships (AORs) were retired before the new Joint Support Ships were built. The gap has been partially filled by the lease of MV *Asterix* as an interim AOR to conduct replenishments at sea. But if Canadian defence strategy calls for the RCN to be able to field two task groups, then having only one AOR is problematic.

There are questions about the future of naval task groups. Will the task group concept be applicable in the future? Much has changed in terms of naval capabilities and technology. Will new technology allow warships to disperse ever more and yet maintain coordination? In other words, what effect will enhanced communication technology have on task groups? What effect will small but often lethal unmanned surface and sub-surface vessels have on a task group? Will new technology mean that task groups become vulnerable to swarming tactics? *Leadmark 2050* says the navy recognizes these changes and that it must be “agile and adaptable”⁸ to respond.

As the idea of whole-of-government operations becomes more accepted, it is clear that future task groups will incorporate other government departments. In some cases this may involve Canadian Coast Guard ships, or other government personnel embarked on RCN ships. And joint and combined operations (i.e., operations not only with other naval forces but with other military forces and civilian agencies) will become more important. How will this affect RCN task groups? Personnel will need to be accommodated on ships. If modern warships are built to reduce crew size, accommodation on warships may not be sufficient – modern task groups include command and control personnel, plus legal and public relations personnel, and possibly representatives of other government departments and non-governmental organizations. Will task group commanders operate from ashore in the future as technology enables them to see the common operating picture and communicate in real time? These are questions that are still being discussed.

⁸ *Leadmark 2050*, p. 34.

Conclusions

As a country with a relatively small population but which is geographically large and has oceans on three sides, the RCN has unique challenges. And as a blue-water navy, the RCN requires a mix of platforms – frigates, patrol vessels, submarines, supply ships, helicopters – in sufficient quantities in order to undertake the roles the government assigns to it. Given Canadian geography, these platforms are split between the East Coast and the West Coast which are thousands of kilometres apart. It is hoped that as the National Shipbuilding Strategy produces ships, it will make it easier for the RCN to generate task groups.

In some cases a task group will not be appropriate and a single ship can do the job. Sending a single ship reduces the need for an accompanying support ship, and if circumstances change, a task group can be generated. The deployment of a task group will be based on considerations of the task and the assets and resources available, including readiness of ships and personnel, and availability of a support ship. However, unlike a single ship, a task group enables the RCN (and hence the government) to have a greater role and voice in the management of a crisis. The concept may change, but it is likely that task groups will remain relevant.