



NAVAL INTEROPERABILITY

Canada is a medium-sized country – not in geographic size but in size of its economy and population. And, along with this, Canada has a medium-sized navy. But Canada is also a state that trades (see Briefing Note #1, Canada as a Maritime State), and it has long had a foreign policy that looks outwards and supports international activity. As a medium-sized country with a medium-sized navy, Canada has always favoured participating in multilateral operations. This is partly from necessity and partly from choice. The Canadian Armed Forces generally lack the capacity to achieve their objectives by themselves, and thus tend to act with allies. How can Canada reconcile its desire to be active internationally with its limited naval capability? Another question, looking at the topic from a slightly different angle, is how can Canada satisfy US security concerns and yet retain an independent voice in world affairs? These are questions that underpin the notion of military interoperability.

This Briefing Note will examine the question of *naval* interoperability. It could be argued that of the three military services in Canada – army, navy, air force – the Royal Canadian Navy (RCN) has the greatest interoperability with its American counterpart. As well, in recent decades we have seen that the navy has often been utilized as the first response of the government to crisis and emergency, so the question has relevance to modern response to conflict or threats at sea.

From its inception in 1910, the RCN has worked closely with larger navies – first the Royal Navy and, increasingly since World War II, with the US Navy. We can see the origins of Canada-US military cooperation in the Ogdensburg Declaration of August 1940 by the Canadian Prime Minister and US President, which authorized the creation of a Permanent Joint Board on Defence (PJBD) and created the foundation for increasingly robust military cooperation. The Hyde Park Declaration in 1941 affirmed that Canada and the United States should provide each other with the defence material that each could produce, and should coordinate production of it. The process has continued ever since with standardization relating to military equipment, doctrine, procedures, research and technology. The creation of the North American Air (later Aerospace) Defence (NORAD) Command in 1958 continued the trend, although not in naval terms.

Although the word may not have been used, the concept of interoperability could be seen in NATO during the Cold War. In order to address the Soviet threat, it was necessary for NATO to adopt some measures of standardization and compatibility of equipment and doctrine. Being able to operate together had become an essential element of effective collective defence. The USN was a major factor in the evolution of NATO interoperability. And because the US military was by far the largest actor, standardization and compatibility often drew Canada toward US capabilities and technology. A generally accepted NATO maritime doctrine has evolved which provides guidance about how navies can operate in a collaborative environment. After the Cold War ended, NATO continued to emphasize interoperability among members, which became challenging as new members joined the alliance starting in the 1990s. Now, NATO militaries have achieved high level of interoperability through decades of joint planning, training and exercises.

The concept of interoperability is now firmly integrated into the Canadian defence

establishment. *Strong, Secure, Engaged*, the defence policy released in 2017, talks about deepening the Canadian military's engagement with long-standing, like-minded allies, including the members of NATO.¹ SSE states that the Department of National Defence "will continue to demonstrate Canada's steadfast commitment to NATO by maintaining high-quality, interoperable, and expeditionary forces which Canada can deploy, as needed, to effectively contribute to NATO deterrence posture, operations, exercises and capacity building activities."²

What does interoperability mean? The word came into use in the 1990s. And the term is ambiguous enough to incorporate all manner of meanings and interpretations. NATO policy defines interoperability as "the ability for Allies to act together coherently, effectively and efficiently to achieve tactical, operational and strategic objectives."³ And more specifically,

[I]t enables forces, units and/or systems to operate together and allows them to share common doctrine and procedures, each other's infrastructure and bases, and to be able to communicate. Interoperability reduces duplication, enables pooling of resources, and produces synergies among all Allies, and whenever possible with partner countries.⁴

Being interoperable does not mean that states have to have the exact same military equipment. What it means is that the military forces are able to interact, connect, communicate, and exchange data and services with other members.

There are different types and degrees of interoperability. Operational interoperability is different from a deeper integration of structures for command and control. Operational interoperability is designed to ensure that units from different countries operating together can complete a mission. According to NATO, technical interoperability refers to hardware, equipment, armaments and systems; procedural interoperability includes common/similar doctrines and procedures; and human interoperability includes common/similar terminology and training.

Many people focus on the technical elements of interoperability, and they are indeed important. It means the ability of ships, planes and submarines to exchange information, including digital exchange and satellite connectivity. Naval interoperability means that a multinational force is able to carry out naval missions as if it were a single national force. For example, it allows contributing naval units to share a common operational picture.

The RCN has placed significant emphasis on developing and maintaining command, control, communications, computers, intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance (C4ISR) and weapons systems that are interoperable with those of the USN. And in reflection of this, some RCN naval units have played a privileged role in multinational coalitions under US leadership. For example, in the Gulf War in the early 1990s, the Canadian Task Group commander was the only non-American Warfare Commander because of the compatibility and interoperability of Canadian ships with those of the United States. The RCN has a high degree of interoperability with the USN such that the integrated combat system of the *Halifax*-class patrol frigates has allowed these ships to integrate seamlessly into American Carrier Battle Groups (CVBGs).

¹ Government of Canada, *Strong, Secure, Engaged: Canada's Defence Policy*, Ottawa, 2017, p. 89.

² *Ibid.*, p. 91.

³ NATO, "Interoperability: Connecting NATO Forces," 24 March 2020, available at [NATO - Topic: Interoperability: Connecting NATO Forces](#).

⁴ *Ibid.*

Naval interoperability augments the capability of individual state forces. Instead of one navy, it means that a number of allied or partner navies can work together to increase their total capability. This helps with deterrence. Ensuring that navies are interoperable via training, exercises, common protocols and common communication methods also means that these forces are ready if there is a crisis. Having worked together means that naval forces can quickly be up to speed with each other if needed.

No discussion about interoperability would be complete without discussing the tensions that the policy causes. On the positive side, some people argue that naval interoperability makes the RCN much more effective internationally. Joel Sokolsky has noted that “[i]nteroperability with the US is the logical defence posture for a Canadian national security policy based upon continued global engagement.”⁵ SSE argues that “[s]trong partnerships with allies, partners and regional and international organizations are critical to the effective execution of the defence mandate.”⁶ It also states that “Canada and the United States share an unparalleled defence relationship forged by shared geography, common values and interests, deep historical connections and our highly integrated economies. This relationship is critical to every aspect of Canada’s defence interests and economic prosperity.”⁷ Thus, the argument goes, interoperability with the USN magnifies the ability of the RCN to accomplish foreign policy missions.

On a more instrumental note, working with the USN closely, and being interoperable with it even though it is an unequal partnership, allows Canada at least to have a say in operations. This gets Canada a seat at the table, allows it to get information about the situation, and perhaps gives it a voice in the discussion. As well, as a middle power, Canada does not have the resources to build a navy larger enough to go it alone. So, the choice is to be in a relationship that expands Canada’s influence internationally but reduces its sovereignty somewhat, or not being in the relationship and reducing Canada’s international profile. As Dan Middlemiss and Denis Stairs say in an article on the subject, “opting out of the partnership altogether is almost a sure-fire guarantee that Canada’s interests will be benignly neglected or even deliberately ignored by the United States.”⁸

The other side of the argument stresses the reduction of Canadian sovereignty inherent in tying Canada too closely to the United States, always a touchy subject in Canada. This argument says that becoming interoperable with the USN (and/or the US military in general) will limit the ability of the Canadian government to decide where and how to participate in naval actions. Canada’s ability to make decisions would be reduced, and thus Canadian sovereignty would be reduced. And this reduction in sovereignty may come with little or no voice in Washington. Sokolsky notes that “[i]nteroperability may well allow the Canadian navy to make a useful contribution at sea, but it is not likely to permit Ottawa a greater voice or leverage in Washington.”⁹

Perhaps Sokolsky says it best when he says “[m]uch of Canadian foreign and defence policy since the founding of the country has involved navigating between the commitments and

⁵ From Joel J. Sokolsky, “Sailing in Concert: The Politics and Strategy of Canada-US Naval Interoperability,” *Choices*, IRPP, Vol. 8, No. 2 (April 2002), p. 12, available at <http://irpp.org/wp-content/uploads/assets/research/national-security-and-interoperability/new-research-article-8/vol8no2.pdf>.

⁶ *Strong, Secure, Engaged*, p. 89.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 90.

⁸ Danford W. Middlemiss and Denis Stairs, “The Canadian Forces and the Doctrine of Interoperability: The Issues,” *Policy Matters*, Vol. 3, No. 7 (2002), p. 19.

⁹ Sokolsky, “Sailing in Concert,” p. 15.

constraints that go along with being a global actor but not a global power.”¹⁰ Meanwhile, plans to ensure the interoperability of the Canadian Surface Combatants, which are queued up to be built under the National Shipbuilding Strategy, are well underway, and the RCN continues to work closely with the USN and other allies.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 15.