



WHY CANADA NEEDS A NAVY

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As you'll have seen if you've read Briefing Note #1 Canada as a Maritime State and BN #2 Maritime Security Threats, there are many reasons why Canada needs a navy. Canada is a trading state and, by virtue of geography, any trade that doesn't go to our one land neighbour, must travel via the oceans. Canada has the longest coastline in the world and has oceans on three of four borders. As well, Canada prides itself on being a responsible international citizen and acts with other navies to ensure good order at sea – this is for self-interest as well as idealism.

But why specifically a navy? Why not let the Canadian Coast Guard (CCG) take care of things? Or the police? Good questions. In the Canadian tradition, the navy and the coast guard have very different purposes, legal frameworks and capabilities. (See Briefing Note #22 for a discussion of this.) The navy performs roles that are different from the CCG but assists it when requested by the government.

Some states have had navies for centuries – Sweden, for example, just celebrated the 500-year anniversary of the creation of its navy. Formed in 1910 essentially to “keep the fish in and the Americans out,” Canada's navy may have unique origins but the reasons for its continued existence resonate in all states with coastlines.¹

Ken Booth, a well-known British analyst of maritime security, talked about a triad of naval responsibilities – what has become known as Booth's Triangle.² The three elements of the triangle are defence, constabulary roles and diplomacy. This provides a framework to understand what navies do and why we need them.

Navies don't exist for their own purposes. They exist to serve the state, and they provide the government with useful instruments of policy. They can, for example, be tasked to undertake the following:

- wage war (no explanation necessary!);
- provide self-defence and deterrence in home and adjacent waters (for example, monitoring/surveillance of who is using Canadian waters, deterring attack);
- enforce national and international laws governing the use of the oceans (for example, laws relating to freedom of navigation, pollution, fishing, piracy, smuggling, trade);
- assert sovereignty in waters under or claimed to be under national jurisdiction (for example, in the Arctic);
- assist civilian agencies in Canada as requested (for example, search and rescue at sea); and
- serve as an instrument of foreign policy (for example to promote positive relations with potential trade partners, provide disaster relief, transport Canadians who are caught in conflict, participate in United Nations operations).

The ships are extremely flexible – the same ship can be, and often is, tasked for disaster relief, training and exercises, counter-piracy/terrorism operations and war-fighting.

Defence

The first priority of any state – including Canada – is to protect itself. This is why states have armed forces. A navy's role is to defend the country from threats coming from the sea. Navies are constantly on the lookout for threats to (or coming from) the maritime approaches to the country. This can be done via satellite surveillance, and certainly this is a part of it, but having naval ships on patrol is an excellent way to ascertain who is on, under, or above the water surrounding Canada. Navies are responsible for controlling, monitoring and protecting the waters off the coasts.

If a war were to occur, navies would be called upon, as they were in the Second World War, to fight in the conflict. In addition to fighting off attacks coming from the sea, they are crucial to protect trade, supplies, personnel and equipment being transported to and from the theatre of war. To enhance defence of the country, Canada has entered a number of alliances, the most prominent of them being the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). In this capacity Canada is extending the reach of its concern about defence from just itself to its allies. As well, if there is a war, then it is helpful for navies to have had experience working together. It is extremely rare that Canada and the Royal Canadian Navy (RCN) act alone internationally, and this is why Canada works so closely with allies. The RCN participates in numerous exercises and operations with other navies. (See Briefing Notes #36, 37, 38 for more on alliances and exercises.) This not only creates good operational practices, Canadian personnel get to know the personnel of other countries who can be valuable contacts in the future if there is conflict.

Not that long ago, concern about maritime security/defence was seen as simply deterring or facing the threats posed by the military forces of other states. Now, security is seen in a much broader context, and includes environmental concerns, the physical safety of shipping and the need to counter terrorism and transnational crime at sea.

Law and Order: Constabulary Duties

Booth's Triangle includes constabulary duties for naval forces. In Canada's case, the CCG and RCMP have primary duty in Canadian waters in this regard, and the navy is used as a supplement to them. However, on some occasions, naval capabilities are needed to make sure that national and international laws are respected and enforced in Canadian waters and to make sure Canadian waters are not used for illegal purposes. Thus, when asked, the navy will assist the forces of law and order. A navy ship provides a level of deterrence and armament that is more likely to discourage lawbreakers at sea than a coast guard vessel (whereas some coast guards are armed, the CCG has very limited weaponry). The ability to use force to deter or to compel lawbreakers at sea is a means of last resort. This is because, as Peter Haydon, a Canadian defence policy analyst, writes "[o]n its own, a non-military coast guard cannot provide the necessary guarantee of compliance, and certainly would not be able to manage violence should the need arise – this is a naval task."³

The navy also assists civil powers in search and rescue. If a ship or an aircraft goes down over water, the navy provides assets in the search. For example, when Swiss Air 111 went down off Nova Scotia in 1998, the navy provided assistance in the search for survivors and recovery of the wreckage. The navy is also useful to coordinate such activities, given that navy ships have excellent command and control capabilities, and sophisticated communication equipment.

Moreover, the navy tends to be the only organization capable of coordinating complex and multi-agency security operations at sea.

In international waters, the navy is a prime agent for helping to assure order on the oceans. For example, the RCN has participated in freedom of navigation operations to ensure that international law relating to access to waterways is upheld. It has participated in operations off the coast of Somalia to address the piracy and to protect international shipping. It continues to participate in operations in the Mediterranean to prevent movement of weapons and terrorists on the oceans, and in the Caribbean to interdict the movement of narcotics.

Naval Diplomacy

Naval diplomacy is an excellent way for governments to increase the visibility of Canada and indicate interest in and commitment to other states. This brings us to the role of naval diplomacy. International law recognizes a warship as the extension of a state – it is part of the state even while traveling abroad. Sending a warship to visit a foreign port provides an illustration of interest – either enmity and coercion or friendship and common interests. The RCN visits ports every year, and these visits usually involve meeting with dignitaries, tours of the ship and interaction via sports or cultural events with the local people. These visits cement ties, help make new friends and continue connections with old friends. But naval diplomacy is more than just making friends, it can also help advance other government policy objectives like trade or human rights. And naval capacity-building and training exercises can help establish civil-military relations in new democracies.

As agents of Canadian foreign policy, navies also illustrate support and concern when natural disasters occur in other countries. Canada is able to respond quickly via the navy. In most cases when there is an international emergency – for example the earthquake that happened in Haiti in 2010 – the navy is the first responder. The RCN keeps several ships at high readiness so that they can be sent at very short notice to respond to conflicts and disasters.

The great thing about navies is that they can send signals of their home state's intent, whether friendly or not, without infringing on the sovereign territory of another state. A ship can “remain outside another state's territory but within its perception, unlike an army force for example, which by its nature must be on some state's territory.”⁴ A naval ship provides a visible symbol of commitment, without the problems inherent in setting foot on someone's territory.

Conclusion

Canada's navy is not a big one, but it is asked to do big things. It is responsible for a huge area in the waters around the country. At home, it acts as a deterrent to foreign forces and assists the civil agencies at the government's request. It has become increasingly active in the Arctic – and will become more active as the Arctic and Offshore Patrol Ships continue to join the fleet. Outside Canada, it serves Canadian foreign policy, and it acts to protect good order at sea and help out when disaster strikes. In addition, the navy has provided a symbol of Canadian commitment to international operations sanctioned by the United Nations, and other crisis management operations.

As the definition of security broadens to new challenges and new responsibilities, the RCN provides flexibility to support national maritime security and acts as an instrument of foreign policy and a symbol of Canada abroad. It is also a symbol of Canada's statehood. To quote

Haydon, “[n]ot maintaining an effective naval force is tantamount to surrendering one’s sovereignty at sea. An effective navy is a prerequisite of statehood; a country with an ocean but without a navy cannot claim to be truly sovereign.”⁵