



THE CANADIAN COAST GUARD AND THE RCN ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

Updated September 2022

As a country that borders three oceans and trades with countries around the world, Canada maintains two sea-going services – the Canadian Coast Guard (CCG) and the Royal Canadian Navy (RCN). These two services operate very different fleets and, while their tasks sometimes overlap in order to protect Canadian national interests, they are fundamentally different organizations with unique responsibilities, capabilities and mandates.

The Canadian Coast Guard is a civilian service located within the Department of Fisheries and Oceans (DFO). Formed in 1962, it provides a diverse set of maritime services in Canadian waters. From environmental protection, maritime search and rescue, icebreaking, navigational assistance, fisheries patrols and support to law enforcement, the CCG not only has a broad mandate to fulfill but also the responsibility to support other agencies within DFO and other federal departments in fulfilling their mandates.

In the Arctic the Coast Guard is the country's most visible presence, with two heavy and five medium icebreakers capable of operating across the Northwest Passage during the navigable season. In the country's valuable fishing grounds, the CCG supports fisheries research in partnership with other agencies in DFO while preventing illegal fishing. Unlike many other coast guards around the world, the CCG is not a military or law enforcement service, meaning that it does not have the mandate to enforce Canadian law. It does, however, support the agencies that do. In protecting Canadian fisheries, preventing trespassing and enforcing law and regulations in Canadian waters, it works with the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) and Canadian Fisheries Officers by providing platforms for these agencies to do their jobs.

The CCG also takes a role in monitoring Canada's maritime space. It manages vessel traffic and tracks ship movements, looking out for potential security threats. It provides vessel screening and feeds its intelligence into the Marine Security Operations Centres (MSOCs), which give the government's maritime and security services a holistic understanding of vessel movements and activity in Canadian waters. (See Briefing Note #19 about the MSOCs.)

The CCG is also responsible for safe navigation across Canada's navigable waterways. To this end, it sets and maintains aids to navigation – including buoys and lighthouses – that facilitate safe shipping operations along Canada's coasts and across its internal waters. It also works with the Canadian Hydrographic Service (which is also part of DFO) to map Canada's shipping lanes. In recent years, this task has taken added importance in the Arctic and the CCG has played a large role in charting waterways which still remain largely unmapped.

In the event of a pollution incident in Canadian waters, the CCG is also the lead agency responding. It maintains teams of environmental response personnel and provides on-scene commanders to coordinate response (or a monitoring officer if the polluter is able to respond).¹

As we can see, the CCG is a civilian agency, operating unarmed vessels, tasked with internal safety and security missions. It assists shipping and supports other Canadian agencies in their maritime roles. In contrast, the RCN is a military service, operating often heavily armed warships, tasked with defence (as opposed to safety and security) and overseas power projection.

Founded in 1910 as the Naval Service of Canada and given royal sanction on 29 August 1911, the Canadian navy has been responsible for conducting military operations at sea during wartime, both in defence of the homeland and to project power abroad. In peacetime, the navy continues to train to fight wars, including many exercises with allies that enhance Canada's ability to work with other navies (what is referred to as interoperability) (See Briefing Note #36 on Naval Interoperability.) In peacetime the navy also conducts a myriad of duties unrelated to warfighting. For example, it provides humanitarian assistance, conducts port calls and provides support to Canada's civilian agencies, to name only a few such regular taskings.

Like the CCG, the RCN has a mandate for domestic maritime security and, like the CCG, it undertakes that role by supporting those agencies responsible for law enforcement and regulatory compliance. An RCN vessel can carry fisheries and pollution prevention officers, RCMP, or local law enforcement officials (and in some cases the RCN has worked with American law enforcement agents). Canadian warships also work alongside the CCG on sovereignty patrols and to rehearse a whole-of-government response to pollution, trespassing and other scenarios. The RCN and the CCG also cooperate in building the government's maritime situational awareness, sending information to the MSOC centres for analysis and dissemination back to CCG and RCN vessels.

Despite this overlap, the RCN's principal task and *raison d'être* remains defence and security, not safety. (The RCN's purpose and mission is outlined in Briefing Notes #3 and #4.) Briefly, the RCN's primary mission is to secure/defend the maritime approaches to Canada and, in partnership with the United States, to North America as well.² The military nature of the service allows the navy to provide a level of defence and deterrence that the CCG cannot, and the navy tends to focus on state-based opponents, rather than criminals and trespassers – although the RCN has participated in operations against non-state actors in counter-piracy and counter-terrorism patrols in recent years.

Unlike the CCG, the RCN also has a global role. Because Canada faces no immediate defence threats in North America (with the possible exception of ballistic-missile submarines and other undersea state-based predators), and because it relies on a global alliance system for its security, the RCN often deploys abroad. Regardless of where it goes, as noted above, it trains with allies and partners and provides a visible symbol of Canada's commitment to its allies and global security. A good example is the RCN's regular participation in *Operation Reassurance* – a European deployment designed to demonstrate Canada's NATO commitment in the face of Russian aggression.

The RCN's overseas deployments are also intended to contribute to what RCN strategic doctrine describes as “maritime peace and good order.”³ Because Canada is a trading state, reliant on safe and easy access to global sea lanes (see Briefing Note #1), the navy plays a role in ensuring the safety and stability of those global commons. As such, for example, the RCN has participated in anti-piracy operations off Somalia and West Africa, and conducted operations off the coast of North Korea to enforce UN sanctions. Along these lines, the navy also trains with partner states to increase their capacity to respond more effectively to those local threats which might affect global trade and international shipping.

The types of ships deployed by the CCG and the RCN are well adapted to their roles and responsibilities. The RCN fleet is comprised of combat ships – such as frigates and submarines – and patrol craft for domestic operations. The Coast Guard fleet is made up of icebreakers, science vessels, buoy tenders, survey ships and multi-tasked vessels well suited to the CCG's broad mandate. Both these services will be receiving new ships through the National

Shipbuilding Strategy (NSS). The CCG has already received three Offshore Fisheries Science Vessels and will receive one Offshore Oceanographic Science Vessel. In the next decade, it will receive one polar icebreaker and two Arctic and Offshore Patrol Ships. The RCN will receive a total of six Arctic and Offshore Patrols Ships (three of which it has already received), two Joint Support Ships and up to 15 Canadian Surface Combatants. As well, in May 2021, the government announced that two new polar icebreakers would be constructed for the CCG. All of these new ships will enhance the capabilities of both services.⁴

Canada's two sea services have some obvious overlap in their mandate for domestic safety and security. The Arctic and Offshore Patrol Ships, which among other things, have mandates for sovereignty/presence operations, surveillance and search and rescue in the North, could be seen to blur the line between the RCN and CCG in the Arctic. And, unlike other RCN ships that are designed for combat, the AOPS are patrol vessels, not warships, and are very lightly armed.

This overlap will not affect the regular cooperation between the CCG and RCN towards common national security objectives. The fact is that, despite some commonalities, the two fleets have their own unique purposes.

Notes

¹ On this see: DFO, "Canadian Coast Guard Environmental Response Marine Spills Contingency Plan," April 2011.

² Royal Canadian Navy, *Leadmark: The Navy's Strategy for 2020* (Ottawa: Directorate of Maritime Strategy, 2001), iv.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Government of Canada, "Government of Canada Announces Polar Icebreakers to Enhance Canada's Arctic Presence and Provide Critical Services to Canadians," Press Release, 6 May 2021.