



Naval Interoperability

Canada is a maritime state. Its economy is dependent upon its ability to trade internationally, and its foreign policy is outward facing and hinges upon international activity. As a middle power with a medium-sized navy, Canada has historically tended to participate in multilateral operations to maintain this level of international activity. Though in part by choice, a degree of this proclivity towards multilateral operations stems from necessity, in that the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) broadly lacks the capacity required to achieve most international objectives by itself, without the aid of its allies. As such, Canada reconciles this restricted military capacity with its desire to be internationally active by exercising interoperability with its international allies.

Of the three services of the CAF – the Army, Air Force, and Navy – the Royal Canadian Navy (RCN) arguably enjoys the highest level of interoperability with its American equivalent. Since its founding in 1910, the RCN has worked alongside larger navies, initially with the Royal Navy and, since the Second World War, increasingly with the US Navy (USN). The continental military cooperation between Canada and the US dates back to the August 1940 Ogdensburg Declaration, through which the US president and Canadian prime minister established a Permanent Joint Board on Defence (PJBD) and laid the foundation for significant military cooperation between the North American neighbours. The 1941 Hyde Park Declaration strengthened this cooperation further, establishing that the US and Canada would coordinate and share their defence productions. The Canada-US military collaboration only deepened in the ensuing decades, with the standardization of their military technology, research, procedures, doctrine, and equipment, and perhaps most notably with the inauguration of the North American Air (now Aerospace) Defence Command (NORAD) in 1958. Though the term “interoperability” was not yet used, the stage for its practice was clearly set.

Indeed, the Cold War conduct of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) demonstrated the growing trend towards interoperability. Confronting the Soviet threat and establishing collective defence required the NATO allies to operate together, which in turn required participating nations to adopt some standardization measures and ensure the compatibility of their military doctrines and equipment. Since the US military was – and remains – the largest actor in NATO, its navy was key in the development of NATO interoperability, and its technologies and capabilities remain the “standard” towards which other allied navies (including Canada’s) have trended. Over time, a broadly accepted NATO maritime doctrine has emerged that offers guidance on how allied navies can and should operate collaboratively. Even when the Cold War drew to a close, NATO maintained its emphasis on its members’ interoperability. Though the integration of new members into the alliance, starting in the 1990s, has presented challenges for that interoperability, years of joint exercises, training, and planning between NATO militaries have enhanced their ability to work together towards unified operational objectives.

In tandem with this evolving prioritization of interoperability through NORAD and NATO, the Canadian defence establishment has thoroughly adopted the concept. Canada’s 2017 defence

policy, *Strong, Secure, Engaged (SSE)*, speaks of expanding the CAF's engagement with its like-minded and longstanding allies, including its fellow NATO members.¹ According to *SSE*, 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

The term "interoperability" itself emerged in discourse in the 1990s, and it is sufficiently ambiguous to encompass a variety of interpretations and meanings. NATO's policies define it as "the ability for Allies to act together coherently, effectively and efficiently to achieve tactical, operational and strategic objectives,"³ specifically noting that interoperability:

... 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

Interoperability does not require or suggest that states possess the same military equipment. Instead, it represents the ability of military forces to communicate, connect, interact, and exchange services and data with other naval allies and NATO members.

Various degrees of interoperability exist. Technical interoperability, for instance, refers to systems, armaments, equipment, and hardware, and it includes the ability of submarines, planes, and vessels to exchange information, including satellite connectivity and digital exchange. Procedural interoperability entails similar or common procedures and doctrines, while human interoperability refers to similar or common training and terminology. More broadly, operational interoperability aims for units from different nations to be able to operate together in the pursuit of a common mission, while naval interoperability indicates that a multinational force of naval units can conduct missions towards a common operational objective as if it were a single, unified, national force. Naval interoperability in particular supplements the capabilities of the individual state forces involved. By involving a number of partner or allied navies working together, rather than one navy on its own, the total force's capability is elevated, enhancing its deterrent effect. Recurring exercises and training, as well as possessing common communication methods and protocols, are integral to maintaining this interoperability and ensuring that the forces are prepared to respond to any crisis that may occur.

The RCN has placed a great deal of focus on both the development and maintenance of command, control, communications, computers, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (C4ISR) systems, as well as weapons systems, that are interoperable with those utilized by the USN. As a result of this interoperability, RCN units have occasionally assumed leading roles in US-led multinational coalitions. For instance, in the Gulf War, the high interoperability and compatibility of Canadian vessels with those of the USN led to the Canadian Task Group commander becoming the only warfare commander who was not American. This high level of interoperability has also allowed Canada's Halifax-class patrol frigates – thanks to their integrated combat systems – to be incorporated into American carrier battle groups.

There are real benefits to this policy of naval interoperability. Some commentators insist that it enhances the international effectiveness of the RCN, with Joel Sokolsky arguing that “[i]nteroperability with the US is the logical defence posture for a Canadian national security policy based upon continued global engagement.”⁵ *SSE*, similarly, insists that “[s]trong partnerships with allies, partners and regional and international organizations are critical to the effective execution of the defence mandate.”⁶ As it continues, “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 RCN’s interoperability with the USN arguably augments its ability to successfully perform foreign policy missions.

A further benefit of this RCN-USN interoperability is that it grants Canada influence on operations, providing “a seat at the table,” giving it access to information about the operations, and influence. According to Dan Middlemiss and Denis Stairs, “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 Finally, Canada, as a middle power, lacks the resources to expand its navy to the size needed to “go it alone,” making interoperability a necessity for the nation to preserve the international profile it seeks.

Of course, this interoperability is not without its prospective drawbacks. Some people argue that integrating Canada so closely with the US curtails and diminishes Canada’s sovereignty, with high military and naval interoperability restricting the Canadian government’s ability to independently determine when, where, and how to partake in naval operations and activities. Instead, these decisions would be made in Washington, perhaps with little or no Canadian input. As Sokolsky notes, while interoperability may elevate the RCN’s ability to usefully contribute in the maritime arena, “it is not likely to permit Ottawa a greater voice or leverage in Washington.”⁹

Sokolsky aptly summed Canada’s situation when he wrote that “[m]uch of Canadian foreign and defence policy since the founding of the country has involved navigating between the commitments and constraints that go along with being a global actor but not a global power.”¹⁰ Indeed, Canada faces two alternatives respecting its naval interoperability: embrace interoperability to broaden its international influence at the potential cost of its sovereignty, or turn away from interoperability at the expense of its international profile. For their part, the Government of Canada and RCN appear poised to continue to strengthen the nation’s naval interoperability. The River-class destroyers, now under construction, are being planned with interoperability in mind, and the RCN continues to closely collaborate and cooperate with the USN and Canada’s other naval allies.

References

¹ *Strong, Secure, Engaged: Canada’s Defence Policy* (Ottawa: Government of Canada, 2017), 89.

² *Strong, Secure, Engaged*, 91.

³ NATO, “Interoperability: Connecting NATO Forces,” March 24, 2020, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/topics_84112.htm.

⁴ NATO, “Interoperability.”

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

⁶ *Strong, Secure, Engaged*, 89.

⁷ *Strong, Secure, Engaged*, 90.

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

⁹ Sokolsky, “Sailing in Concert,” 15.

¹⁰ Sokolsky, “Sailing in Concert,” 15.