



Canadian Naval Task Groups

The Royal Canadian Navy (RCN) has long prioritized its interoperability with its allies. However, in addition to operating together with its allies, vessels of the RCN also often work independently. When doing so, RCN vessels regularly deploy and operate in a task group. As *Leadmark 2050*, the RCN's strategic document, explains: a naval task group entails “a tactically self sufficient grouping of ships, aircraft and submarines whose sensors and weapons are integrated into a highly cohesive warfighting whole.”¹

Navies have long deployed in task groups and the concept is now enshrined in Canadian, American, and North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) naval doctrine. RCN strategic documents have, over the past several decades, emphasized the need for a naval force that can act autonomously and be self-sustained. Government defence policy has also long recognized the role of task groups in supporting such a force. The 1994 White Paper on Defence championed the idea that the RCN must have a naval task group on each of the nation's coasts and Canada's 2017 defence policy, *Strong, Secure, Engaged (SSE)* classified the naval task group as the RCN's “core ... operating concept.”² In accordance with government policy, then, the RCN must maintain a highly ready naval task group “whose ultimate purpose is to provide Canada with an independent and sovereign ability to control events at sea.”³

In Canada, a naval task group is comprised of several components, including warships, a support element, and a command-and-control element (which itself includes the commander of the task group or CTG). *SSE* stipulates that a naval task group be “[c]omposed of up to four surface combatants and a joint support ship, and supplemented where warranted by a submarine,” thus ensuring “the full breadth of combat capability, force enablers, specialized teams, maritime helicopters, and remotely piloted systems.”⁴ Meanwhile, *Leadmark 2050* identifies that a naval task group will possess one Victoria-class submarine (depending upon the mission's needs), one support vessel, multiple CH-148 Cyclone maritime helicopters (distributed throughout the task group to ensure that aircraft can be consistently and simultaneously airborne if and when needed), and two or three Halifax-class frigates. These frigates will, in the future, be replaced in a Canadian naval task group with one River-class destroyer, carrying the task group commander and their staff.

Since the delivery of these River-class is still several years away, their eventual command and control (C2) functions currently fall to the Halifax-class frigates, four of which have been modernized to receive a supplemented command package that enables them to serve as flagships.⁵ Despite these guidelines, however, the particular vessels that participate in a task group depend upon the mission and operation. Any combination of submarines, frigates, Maritime Coastal Defence Vessels (MCDVs), Arctic and Offshore Patrol Vessels (AOPVs), Maritime Patrol Aircraft (MPA), and helicopters could comprise a Canadian naval task group. As the RCN continues to procure new vessels under the National Shipbuilding Strategy, it will also integrate its new Joint Support Ships (JSSs) and CSCs into its task groups.

Operating such task groups is advantageous for the RCN for a variety of reasons. First, task groups are inherently flexible, in their ability to combine naval units with varying capabilities in order to best address the assignment or mission at hand. As a result, the Navy as a whole can become more cost-effective, because the use of task groups means that not all vessels require all capabilities. Moreover, the integration into a singular task group of diverse assets like aircraft, surface vessels, and subsurface vessels can allow for the accumulation of information that enables all members of the task group to “see what each of them sees individually, from the ocean depths to near space, and throughout the electromagnetic and acoustic spectrums.”⁶ As such, vessels’ intelligence-gathering and surveillance abilities are significantly enhanced, allowing for a fuller operating picture or recognized maritime picture. Furthermore, since a task group is self-contained, in that its components can fulfill all the functions required to maintain its operationality, it is able to defend itself from threats⁷ and does not, unlike an air force or army, require shore-based facilities to remain effective. This flexible and self-contained nature means that task groups can change as their missions evolve, with vessels being withdrawn or added as needed. For a medium-sized navy like the RCN, task groups can enhance the Navy’s ability to perform naval diplomacy, and to deploy in mere days’ notice – given the RCN’s policy to constantly maintain some vessels at high readiness – this enables the Government of Canada to rapidly respond to crises.

Cognizant of these advantages, the RCN has relied on task groups to undertake numerous high-profile missions. For instance, in 1991, HMCS *Athabaskan*, HMCS *Terra Nova*, and HMCS *Protecteur*, accompanied by five helicopters, participated in Operation *Friction*, which saw the task group being deployed to the Persian Gulf to aid the United Nations-mandated mission to blockade Iraq following its invasion of Kuwait. In so doing, the Canadian vessels participated in the larger US-led task force tasked with removing Iraq’s forces from the country. In 2005, similarly, HMCS *Athabaskan*, HMCS *Toronto*, HMCS *Ville de Quebec*, CCGS *Sir William Alexander*, a boat crew, and a dive team deployed as a task group in Operation *Unison*, joining the US-led task force responding to the devastation of Hurricane Katrina. Five years later, in 2010, an earthquake in Haiti prompted Canada to deploy a task group of HMCS *Athabaskan*, HMCS *Halifax*, helicopters, and the Disaster Assistance Response Team to join Joint Task Force Haiti. This joint task force also involved the participation of the Canadian Army, as well as representatives from non-governmental organizations and the Department of Foreign Affairs. That same year, Operation *Podium* included an RCN task group, in addition to Royal Canadian Air Force assets (alongside the North American Aerospace Defence Command or NORAD), as part of the Canadian Forces’ contribution to the Integrated Security Unit. Led by the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, this Unit aimed to ensure the security of the 2010 Vancouver Olympic and Paralympic Winter Games.

RCN task groups have conducted a host of missions, ranging from maritime interdiction, ship escort, and sea denial/sea control to the enforcement of sanctions, disaster relief, and the support of onshore forces. These missions have also regularly seen RCN personnel assuming command over international naval forces, with some instances even seeing Canadian task groups partaking in international task forces led by Canadian task force commanders, as occurred in the Gulf War in 1991 and in Middle Eastern operations following 9/11. Canadians also frequently assume leadership of NATO task forces.

The naval task group concept elicits some questions as the RCN looks towards the future. A primary question revolves around the need for a task group to be self-sustaining, self-sufficient, and self-replenishing at sea, with respect to its weapons, fuel, ability to conduct basic repairs, supplies (of spare parts, water, and food), and provision of health services to its personnel. Such replenishment responsibilities fall to the task group's support ship. The RCN, however, retired its two supply ships (AORs) in the mid-2010s, leaving the Navy with a significant capability gap as it awaits the construction of its Joint Support Ships (JSSs) under the National Shipbuilding Strategy. MV *Asterix* has assumed these replenishment duties as an interim AOR until the JSSs are delivered. Still, that this converted container ship constitutes the RCN's only replenishment vessel is problematic given that Canada's defence strategy calls for the Navy to be able to field a task group on both the Atlantic and Pacific coasts.

Further questions regarding the future of the naval task group arise due to evolutions in naval technologies and capabilities. It is yet unclear what impact changes in communication technologies will have on task groups, or what ramifications unmanned subsurface and surface vessels – which can be small but deadly – will have. New technologies could render task groups susceptible to swarming tactics, which could compromise their effectiveness in hostile environments and situations. *Leadmark 2050*, for its part, indicates that the RCN is cognizant of such questions and changes, and it acknowledges that the Navy must be “agile and adaptable” to respond effectively.⁸

Further challenges to the task group concept may arise from the increasing tendency to conduct whole-of-government operations. As task groups are expanded to include more government departments, RCN ships may be required to embark other government personnel, and task groups may be required to also include vessels from, say, the Canadian Coast Guard. As combined and joint operations involving other civilian agencies and military forces become increasingly more common, it is unclear how RCN task groups will be impacted or how they will accommodate such expansions in participating personnel. Indeed, the shift to whole-of-government operations will increase the number of personnel requiring accommodations on participating vessels (including, potentially, not only command/control personnel but also public relations and legal personnel, as well as representatives from non-governmental organizations and other government departments). This could prove complicated as contemporary warships are increasingly constructed to minimize their crew sizes. Another question still open for discussion is whether task group commanders will need to be physically stationed with the task group at all, as advancements in technology allow them to immediately communicate and perceive the common operating picture from ashore. As naval technologies evolve, what a naval task group looks like and how it functions will evolve too.

References

¹ Royal Canadian Navy (RCN), *Leadmark 2050: Canada in a New Maritime World* (2016), 43.

² *Strong, Secure, Engaged: Canada's Defence Policy* (Ottawa: Government of Canada), 2017, 35.

³ RCN, *Leadmark 2050*, 43.

⁴ *Strong, Secure, Engaged*, 35.

⁵ Since an onshore supporting commander generally tasks maritime patrol aircraft (MPA) to operate with task groups, such aircraft are not considered to be directly elements of the naval task group. RCN, *Leadmark 2050*, 43.

⁶ RCN, *Leadmark 2050*, 44.

⁷ Such threats could include attacks from non-state forces utilizing unconventional means (like using a speedboat packed with explosives to ram a warship) or traditional attacks from state forces under, over, or on the sea (such as those using torpedoes, missiles, bombs, or bullets). Today, naval task groups can also encounter threats stemming from electronic, acoustic, information, electro-optical, and electro-magnetic pulse attacks.

⁸ RCN, *Leadmark 2050*, 34.