

Canada needs a navy that can do the job

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The Canadian navy doesn't make the headlines very often. Ships at sea are always far over the horizon doing essential tasks, but not in the news -- unless there is a disaster or, as is sometimes the case, a botched contract at home or a government plan to build expensive new vessels. But Canada needs a navy, a quietly professional service that projects power abroad, that can respond quickly to a crisis and, just as important, depart silently when the mission is over. Deploying an air force fighter squadron or a battalion of infantry is always more showy, but also slower and more expensive in dollars and usually in lives.

The Harper government has stated its intention to refit or replace most of the navy's 30 ships. There will be a mid-life major upgrade for the dozen frigates, three new Joint Support Ships, six to eight Arctic Offshore Patrol Ships and some 15 Surface Combatant Ships to eventually replace the present three aged destroyers and the frigates when they reach the end of their seaworthiness. This won't be cheap. Nor will it be fast.

In fact, because the Chretien Liberals cut defence spending and slowed all planning for the future, the ship refit and building program is only now getting underway. What this means is that once the frigates begin to come out of service for their updating, the navy will have very few ships it can put in the water. Some estimates suggest that Canada, a nation with three oceans to patrol along with overseas commitments, could have as few as five major vessels at sea five years from now. This frankly is a disgrace that can be attributed wholly to the Chretien government's utter indifference to defence.

But the situation is worse than this. When the navy's frigate program ended in the mid-1990s, the very skilled shipyard workforces that had built the Halifax-class ships broke up and scattered. There was no naval work on hand. So now that we are to begin a major naval program again, the skilled trades need to be recruited, trained, and put to work. Any sensible government, having paid to build a labour force, would have kept it going with a "continuous build" policy. Not Canada's, however, and so we will need to invent the wheel (a very high-tech, complicated wheel, to be sure) over again. This will again cost heavily. We must not make this mistake of starting and stopping, of boom and bust, again. A little rational planning will go a long way -- and keep work going at Canada's few shipyards for the foreseeable future.

To get it right this time, the government needs to consider the future strategic environment. Trade has shifted massively from the Atlantic to the Pacific Oceans; already the volume in the Pacific is 3.5 times that of the Atlantic. There are rising naval powers on the Pacific -- Russia, China, India, Japan -- and there are rapidly growing numbers of submarines operated there by a number of nations, not all friendly.

To protect our national interests, Canada needs a bigger navy than its present 30-ship fleet and 8,000 sailors. Senators Hugh Segel and Colin Kenny, one a Conservative, the other a Liberal, have recently called for Canada to have a 60-ship navy. They are surely correct. The nation must have a strong presence in the Pacific (and an expanded base at Esquimalt, B. C.) and the Atlantic. Twelve to 15 of the planned Surface Combatant Ships on each coast would meet the need for 2025 and beyond. Then Canada needs a credible naval and Coast Guard presence in the melting Arctic where the international scramble for resources is likely to be fierce and where the Northwest Passage has the potential to alter traditional trade routes and pose huge environmental and security challenges. The Conservative government's Canada First policy is the right one, but it needs more ships and more sailors to adequately protect the homeland.

But Canada First also means protecting national interests abroad. Our sailors must be able to transport and support Canadian troops operating overseas, sometimes perhaps on a hostile shore. The presently planned three Joint Support Ships can't do this; four might be able to manage, but six would be better, along with what General Rick Hillier called "a big honking ship" that could transport four to six helicopters and a battalion-sized expeditionary force. Such ships can also do humanitarian work--in tsunami-hit Indonesia, for example-- that we can scarcely tackle today.

The new navy also must maintain its ability to send task groups abroad to serve independently or jointly with our friends. Presently, the Navy can lead allied task groups because of its high-level of training and command and control skills and because our destroyers have command and control suites. Taking ships out of service in the next few years will make this role all but impossible; the new fleet, the new expanded fleet, will let us do this once more.

All this will cost. The inflation rate is running high for steel, electronics, weapons, and for skilled labour. The cost of oil to put to sea has doubled and might double again. But nations have interests, and interests must be protected. Canada needs a navy that can do the job for the next quarter century and more.

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