The Case for a More Combat-Capable Arctic Offshore Patrol Ship

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Credit: MARLANT Museum

*HMCS **Labrador** in ice in Baffin Bay, circa 1955.*

The Royal Canadian Navy (RCN) is poised to embark upon a new chapter in its history. It is about to be equipped with a new capability that will allow it to defend Canada as a *three* ocean state. It is hoped that construction of the long-awaited Arctic Offshore Patrol Ships (AOPS) will begin in the fall of 2015. *If* this happens, it will mean that the Canadian Navy will be able to operate in the Arctic. The last time it had the ability to do this was in the 1950s when HMCS *Labrador* was commissioned as a navy icebreaker. However in 1957 it was transferred to the Coast Guard returning the navy to being a two ocean force.[1] This new class of warship will mean a transformation for the Canadian Navy. This will require new skills and training and will ultimately affect the overall composition of the fleet well into the future. The addition of these new ships is necessary – Canada is a three ocean country and its limited ability to act in its Arctic backyard has always been problematic.

But as is often the case, the devil is in the details. Are the AOPS as currently configured going to provide Canada with the necessary security in the Arctic? With the addition of four to eight[2] of these vessels Canada will gain an impressive new capability to operate in the region. But the 'known'[3] specifics of the ships suggest that they are primarily being designed to perform constabulary roles. Outside of the helicopter that it can carry, the AOPS will have a very limited combat capability, mounting only a 25-mm gun, radar and space for additional sensors. This is a result of the Canadian Forces' current evaluation of the strategic environment in the region as well as the difficulty of building a vessel that can operate in the Arctic. Building a vessel that can sail into ice-covered waters as well as operate some of the time in blue water requires a vessel that will be expensive. A ship cannot do everything, nor should it be expected to. The question is, given that these vessels will probably serve the Canadian Navy for anywhere between 25-40 years, is it reasonable to assume that they will only need to undertake constabulary duties for this entire time period?

This article will argue that Canadian officials should consider the possibility that these vessels require a more robust combat capability than what is currently being considered. To do so, the article will address two main questions: is there a need to build a better combat capability and is it feasible?

This article offers a response to the article entitled "Canadian Security and Safety in the Arctic: Probable Challenges, Practical Responsibilities," written by Dr. Whitney

Lackenbauer which appeared in the last issue of *Canadian Naval Review*.[4] The crux of the debate here is that Lackenbauer, like the Canadian Navy and the Canadian government, believes that the main requirements of the AOPS will be almost exclusively constabulary in nature. He does not believe that Canada will face a direct military threat in the Arctic. Therefore, the AOPS as currently configured will be more than adequate for its foreseeable service life. This is based on his reading of the international circumpolar security environment. But is he, and the Canadian government, right?

Before I answer that question, it is necessary to consider the argument that Lackenbauer offers in supporting the constabulary focus of the AOPS. There are four main elements to his argument. First, he goes through the Canadian government's assessment and agrees that Canada will not face a significant military threat.[5] He has found that the government's focus on having the AOPS provide support for other vessels, along with the modest support capability of the site being built at Nanisivik is the proper policy to follow. Second, he points out that the government is correct in being concerned that if Canada acts too aggressively in the Arctic, others – meaning the Russians – might feel that they need to respond accordingly. Thus a better combat capability for the AOPS could provoke the Russians into increasing the combat capability of their Arctic forces. Third, he points out that the American government has come to an assessment that is very similar to the Canadian view that the region will remain a low-threat environment. Fourth, he offers the observation that even if both the Canadian and American governments are wrong and the region does experience an increase in tensions, only the Americans would have the ability to respond to Russian submarines and ice-strengthened aircraft carriers. He does concede that the Russian intervention in Ukraine has heightened tensions between the West and Russia, and that there has been a spillover effect into the Arctic. But he goes on to say that regardless of the situation in Ukraine or elsewhere, it is not in Russia's interest to allow the cooperative regime that has developed in the Arctic to be replaced by a return to the tensions of the Cold War. Therefore, the region will retain its current low-level military threat status.

Taken as a whole these are substantial reasons to argue that an effort to increase the combat capability of the AOPS is misguided and therefore a waste of resources and effort. But are they correct? I would say no for several reasons. First, there is no question that the Canadian government has engaged in a significant effort to evaluate the threat environment that it faces. As Lackenbauer has pointed out, the rhetoric of the current government was originally very aggressive, but it has now been moderated.

Credit: Internet

Nanisivik, Nunavut, from the air, 15 March 2006.

Credit: Wikimedia Commons

*Norwegian frigates KNM **Fridtjof Nansen** and KNM **Helge Ingstad** in Oslo, Norway, 24 April 2010.*

Canadian Arctic policies make it very clear that the official position is that there is no military threat in the Arctic.[7] The problem is that governments, even when they have the best of intentions, will often get the future wrong. Few Western governments foresaw the end of the Cold War and the dramatic transformation that it had on Arctic security. Likewise few predicted the rise of the threat of Islamic fundamentalism or that Canada would be employing deadly force in Libya and Iraq.

But even if governments get things right, events change. The British government may have been correct in the 1920s when it predicted that there was and would be no naval threat to the British Empire. It was therefore correct in instituting the 10-year 'holiday' on battleship construction. At the end of the 1920s it was very difficult to think of any naval threat to British naval power. But events changed quickly. It almost seemed that the British government hoped that the existence of the policy would shape events rather than the events shaping the policy. Thus, although the Canadian government may be correct that today the only real need for the AOPS is for constabulary duties, there is no guarantee that this will be the case in the future. Therefore the prudent action would be to consider that a vessel that could be serving into the 2050s and possibly 2060s should be prepared for an unknown future.

What of the second argument – that the development of an increased combat capability on these vessels could cause other actors to increase their capabilities therefore resulting in the development of an arms race in the region? This one is harder to evaluate, and there are a number of considerations involved here. What would an arms race look like? How is it possible to determine if others act simply because of Canadian procurement policies? While this is a possibility it is difficult to determine why any other state would feel compelled to act just because of what Canada has done. The Norwegians have bought and deployed a very combat-capable frigate that also has a limited ice capability.[8] There is no evidence to suggest that the Norwegian decision created a reaction by any of the other Arctic states. Once again focusing on Russia, it seems safe to suggest that current Russian efforts to strengthen capabilities have little to do with the cumulative actions of the NATO forces in the Arctic and much more to do

Credit: Wikimedia Commons

*Russian icebreaker **50 let Pobedy** is an **Arktika**-class nuclear-powered icebreaker and the largest nuclear-powered icebreaker in the world.*

Credit: Viktor Drachev/AFP/Getty Images

*Russian ships block the Ukrainian navy ship **Slavutych** moored in Sevastopol Bay on 20 March 2014. At far left is the **Grisha** V-class corvette **Ternopil** reportedly seized by Russian soldiers using stun grenades and automatic weapons. The black-and-white ship with the blue funnel band is the ocean-going tug **Korets**.*

with Russia's desire to assert better control over its Arctic region. The increase in Russian military action in the region seems likely to be related to the Western response to its actions in Ukraine. Furthermore, it should also be pointed out that the increased willingness of Russia to use force to 'protect' its borders started in Georgia in 2008 and not in 2014 in Ukraine. Therefore, it is difficult to imagine that a Canadian decision to build a more robust combat capability would somehow contribute to a deterioration in the region.

The third reason offered by Lackenbauer is that the Americans have come to the same conclusion as the Canadian government that the Arctic will remain a low-threat military region. The same critique that was offered against the Canadian government can also be applied against the American government. While the assessment may have been correct at the time it was taken, there are no guarantees that such an evaluation will stand for the 20-30 year lifecycle of the AOPS. Is it prudent to base Canadian procurement policy on American assessments? When this was done in the 1960s regarding the Soviet aerospace threat, the Canadian government decision to cancel the construction of the Avro Arrow was seen as a bad decision by many observers.

The related argument that, even if the assessments of the Canadians and Americans prove to be incorrect, ultimately it will be the Americans who will need to act and not Canada, is problematic on several levels. As Lackenbauer has pointed out, the United States continues to struggle with the lasting impact of the 2008 economic crisis. And, while the United States has expanded its examination of the developing international Arctic regime, it has not been able to gather the political will to support the modernization of the existing US Coast Guard fleet of icebreakers, let alone add any other Arctic-capable vessels to either the navy or coast guard.[9] The United States has also slowed down the production of the aircraft that it needs for all purposes and has slowed the tempo at which submarines are being built. This suggests that it will be more difficult than in the past for the Americans to build up their forces.

Should Canada and/or the United States re-evaluate their optimistic view of the Arctic security regime, they will be able to build more assets but between now and when that happens Canada will need to rely on the existing capabilities of allies and friends. So this argument is only correct in so far as the United States is given enough warning to build up its forces to protect Canada's Arctic security as it did for much of the Cold War. This is also based on the assumption that the Americans will retain their willingness to do this, something that may not be true in the future.

Credit: US Army

The first ground-based interceptor is lowered into its silo at the missile defence complex at Fort Greely, Alaska, 22 July 2004. The interceptor is designed to destroy incoming intercontinental ballistic missiles before they reach US airspace.

Thus it is possible to find issues with each of the arguments offered by Lackenbauer – there is a need to hedge one's bet; current Canadian positive assessments of the Arctic strategic context may be wrong; the Americans may be wrong; and it is dangerous to assume that the Americans will always be willing to provide security in the Arctic simply because Canada does not want to do so. But there are two fundamental issues that must be considered that go beyond Lackenbauer's arguments. First, what would a threat that would require a greater combat capability than currently envisioned look like? Second, could the AOPS provide a more meaningful combat role to meet this need?

Unfortunately, recent events have demonstrated how quickly relations between Russia and the United States and Canada can change. The optimistic view of a cooperative Arctic security regime is based primarily on continued good relations between Russia and the other Arctic states. As long as this axis remains strong, the Arctic will remain a region of cooperation and positive relations. If this relationship breaks down, then the region will increasingly face competition and tension. The current situation in Ukraine may be resolved – though it is not clear how that would occur – and perhaps relations will return to what they were throughout the 1990s and early 2000s. But even if relations with Russia over Ukraine return to an even keel, is it possible that other threats may arise? Just as it was impossible for the UK in the 1920s to imagine a naval threat to its survival, so too do some people find it impossible to think of an Arctic threat.

One possibility may have to do with core strategic interest in the Arctic. The United States is increasingly using its bases in Alaska to support its efforts to defend against a North Korean missile threat, and it has been increasing the capability of the interceptors that it places in Fort Greeley, Alaska. After the end of the Cold War, the base was converted into a test site for the American anti-ballistic missile (ABM) program. However over time this has changed and it will soon host the bulk of the American interceptors. Furthermore, it is apparent that whenever the North Koreans increase their missile capability, the Americans increase their response.[10] At what point will China and Russia see this American move as a threat to their security? When that happens what will be the overall impact on Arctic security? Will this ultimately provoke the Chinese to develop Arctic-capable forces? Such concerns remain vague and unlikely but cannot be discarded out of hand.

While it is possible to talk of the need of insurance 'just in case' or to talk of possible scenarios that may or may not come to pass, all of this is moot in the face of the next core question – could the AOPS be configured to be more combat capable and, if so, what could the ships do? This is where the shoals of practicality may sink any argument that the ships should be more than they are currently planned to be. The ships will be a difficult compromise because of the combined *Arctic* and *offshore* elements, and they will be expensive to build. Is it enough for them just to have a constabulary function?[11] What would it mean to give them a better combat capability? First, it is doubtful that they could ever be a useful anti-submarine platform by themselves. In order to be able to cruise through ice, the ships need to have a hull configuration that does not allow them to perform well as an anti-submarine vessel and they will be slow, with a top speed of 17 knots. But this points to the need to ensure that the AOPS can support Canada's maritime helicopters. Through the innovative use of maritime helicopters based on its frigates and destroyers, the Canadian Navy was able to offer a credible defence against Soviet submarines. The return of the 'unidentified' submarine in Swedish waters has reminded the West that there are submarines that will be sent into northern waters. To ensure that the AOPS have

Credit: Wikimedia Commons

B-585 ***Sankt-Peterburg****, lead boat of the Project 677* ***Lada****-class diesel-electric submarines being built for the Russian Navy, shown at the International Maritime Defence Show 2011. This class is rumoured to be the type involved in the incidents in Swedish waters 17-24 October 2014.*

the capability of handling the most potent of Canada's maritime helicopters seems only prudent.

It would also seem prudent that consideration be given to ensure that these vessels are able to incorporate the best sensor and data fusion capabilities. At this point, there is no need. But there have been rumours that the Norwegians are thinking about giving their new frigates an improved ability through their Aegis combat system to integrate with an American-centred ABM system. It may be necessary in the future to think of such a role for the AOPS.

Finally there is the issue of meeting a future maritime surface threat or aerospace threat. While there are plans to place a small gun on board – 25 mm – there seems to be no desire for a more capable gun or missile system, nor does there seem to be any intent to prepare the vessels to be able to accept a more robust capability in the future. The Danes have been successful in using advanced compartmentalization to allow their vessels to load or offload a range of combat capabilities. Designing the AOPS to be able to accept different modules would also seem to be a prudent action.

Yet this does not seem to be the case. It is assumed that there is no conceivable future scenario that would warrant the expense of building in such a capability in the next 20-40 years. But there are possibilities that are easy to imagine. What about a conflict over fish stocks? Few had foreseen the conflict that developed between Canada and Spain in 1995 over turbot beyond Canada's 200-mile EEZ. If fish stock do move northward as the ice melts, the international fishing fleets will follow. It is naïve to think there will be no conflicts over these new fisheries.

Ultimately it is easy to think of future needs for a robust set of capabilities for the AOPS. Just as the decision-makers could not anticipate all of the needs of the Sea Kings half a century ago, today's planners need at least to make allowances for these vessels to be called upon to do a lot more in the next decades. Simply assuming that events will stay exactly as they are is wrong.

Notes

1. Charles Maginley, *The Canadian Coast Guard 1962-2002* (St. Catharines, Ontario: Vanwell Publishing, 2003).
2. Even though the project has been in consideration since the election of Prime Minister Stephen Harper in 2006, and officially announced in July 2007, as of November 2014 there are still no official numbers as to how many ships will be built.
3. The design phase is advanced and there is an understanding of the key attributes of the ships but officially there is no confirmation of the final design. This presents a serious challenge in talking about what its capabilities will actually be. The paradox is that to wait to comment on this issue until the official announcement is made means discussing the topic when it is too late to change anything!
4. Whitney Lackenbauer, "Canadian Security and Safety in the Arctic: Probable Challenges, Practical Responsibilities," *Canadian Naval Review*, Vol. 10, No. 2 (2014), pp. 10-15.
5. Chief of Force Development, Department of National Defence (DND), "Arctic Integrating Concept," Ottawa, 2010.
6. Chief of Naval Operations, United States Navy, "The United States Navy Arctic Roadmap for 2014 to 2030," Washington, February 2014; Office of the President, United States, "National Security Strategy," Washington, May 2010; and White House, "National Strategy for the Arctic Region," May 2013.
7. DND, "CDS/DM Directive for the DND/CF in Canada's North," 12 April 2011; and DND, "Canadian Forces Northern Employment and Support Plan," November 2012.
8. Naval Technology, "Nansen Class Anti-Submarine Warfare Frigates, Norway," 2014, available at www.naval-technology.com/projects/nansen.
9. See for example, Ronald O'Rourke, "Changes in the Arctic: Background and Issues for Congress," Congressional Research Service 7-5700, 14 February 2014.
10. Global Security.org, "Ground Based Interceptor," September 2014, available at www.globalsecurity.org/space/systems/gbi.htm.
11. Once again information on the costs are difficult to acquire. The best official effort to address this has been provided by the Office of the Parliamentary Budget Officer, "Budget Analysis for the Acquisition of a Class of Arctic/Offshore Patrol Ships," Ottawa, 28 October 2014. http://www.pbo-dpb.gc.ca.

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