Editorial:
Maritime Blindness, You Say?

From Canberra to Washington and Ottawa, by way of the hallowed halls of Admiralty, maritime blindness, or sea blindness as it is more often called, is the latest pandemic to strike mankind. At least that is the conclusion one could draw from what some admirals and naval experts are saying. In Ottawa, for instance, two Chiefs of Canada’s Maritime Staff have used maritime blindness recently to describe what they see as a disturbing lack of understanding by many Canadians about their navy and its importance to their country. But are those concerns valid? There isn’t any obvious proof; there has never been any public outcry against naval policies or a public protest in Canada similar to that in New Zealand in the 1980s over the acquisition of frigates. Criticism mainly comes from the media.

The symptoms of maritime blindness and sea blindness seem to be similar but manifest themselves in different ways in different places. Sometimes the affliction is political and at other times it affects the general public. The common denominator is the existence of a significant difference of opinion between the view of the world of the future held by the maritime community and that held by the rest of society. Sometimes this dichotomy reflects concerns over naval employment as well as the nature of the force structure. All this could well be cause for concern if national security is in jeopardy.

Although rifts between naval leaders and their political masters date back to the beginning of history, the latest dimension of the feud has British roots. Last year, the retiring First Sea Lord, Sir Jonathon Band, publicly cautioned politicians, who he saw as visually impaired when required to look at naval problems, against making further cuts to the naval budget while also increasing demands for Royal Navy deployments into troubled areas. “A ship can’t be in two places at once,” he reminded his political masters.1 Admiral Band also made it clear that the sea should still be at the heart of British strategic thinking because the combined effects of piracy, terrorism, drugs, people trafficking and the need to protect energy and trade routes indicated a greater rather than lesser naval role in national security in the future. Underlying his argument was the belief that politicians invariably fail to understand the implications of not providing enough money to keep the navy going as a flexible response force. That sentiment rings as true in Ottawa as it does in London, and is likely to be echoed in several other capitals as well!

Although there has been political dithering and delays in procurement, Canadian governments nearly always give the navy enough ships to meet its commitments. And the claim that when many Canadians were asked, they couldn’t explain the function of their navy, could probably be made just as easily of any military service. Then, why the concern? Clearly, it’s time to see what these claims of blindness are all about and find out why, or if, we should be concerned.

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Writing in the June 2009 issue of US Naval Institute Proceedings, Barrett Tillman addresses the American dimension of sea blindness and takes Admiral Band’s concerns several steps further.2 Audaciously, he questions the requirement for the US Navy’s present-day configuration, which he sees as a Mahanian product of the Cold War focused on power projection, and asks if this structure is still relevant. Yet in discussing the future uses of American sea power, Tillman upholds traditional thinking
that navies are instruments of national policy needing endurance, mobility and flexibility to handle both simple and complex situations anywhere in the world. In this, he predicts an uncertain future in which armed conflict at sea cannot be ruled out. Why? His rationale echoes the concerns of Admiral Band that the economic importance of trade, which the world’s population takes for granted, makes it a vital factor in national security especially since “95 percent of it passes through one of nine choke points.”

Tillman concludes that the onus to correct sea blindness and address parallel concerns over the US Navy’s force structure is on the navy, rather than on anyone else.

Another dimension of sea blindness comes from a 2010 article by Diego Ruiz Palmer entitled “The End of the Naval Era?” in which he criticizes the public’s benign neglect of maritime security issues, which he refers to as *strategic myopia*. Although mainly concerned with environmental issues and lawlessness at sea in the new era of maritime security, he concedes that the risk of naval competition cannot be ignored especially in view of concern over the security of sea lines of communication and freedom of navigation. Much of his focus is on post-naval era force structures and the trend away from ‘blue-water’ fleets to ‘green-water’ and ‘brown-water’ fleets for employment in coastal (littoral) zones and for constabulary operations. He explains that the related strategic concept of responding to small, local skirmishes and general policing of the coastal seas, rather than focusing on sea control and power projection, is not universally embraced, especially in the United States and in Asia where blue-water fleets are still maintained for those purposes.

Sea blindness, in the form of public apathy towards maritime issues, is also a concern in Australia where Professor Lee Cordner of the University of Wollongong sees it as a constraint on the development of realistic maritime strategies. The heart of the problem, he points out, lies in not recognizing that the sea is the medium by which national economies are sustained and thus cannot be taken for granted. In this, there will always be situations requiring government intervention in the interests of national security. But this view is not completely accepted. For instance, while the Australians have made a strong commitment to enforcement and compliance, the need for general-purpose naval forces remains contentious.

It seems that the primary symptom of sea blindness is political and public apathy to the economic importance of the oceans. A secondary factor is the lack of consensus on the size and type of naval forces needed to maintain order at sea and how it should be done. Ironically, environmental threats to the oceans are widely viewed with concern while the economic argument seems far less important.

Canadians, for instance, freely express concern for environmental issues but are not as vocal over the role the oceans play in maintaining their high standard of living. Apparently, it matters not to the Canadian public whether the navy is configured for blue-water or littoral operations or if operations are conducted jointly with other services or as part of a whole-of-government approach to national maritime security. If they are concerned, they are remarkably quiet about it. Is this blindness, or is it ambivalence? Or simply lack of understanding?

Maybe we have to ask if they understand the issues. Has the Canadian Navy connected with the Canadian public sufficiently to explain the basic maritime security facts? Do politicians and the media understand these issues well enough to make good decisions and pass judgement responsibly? Is it up to the navy to be the educators?

Assuming that it is the navy’s role to educate, perhaps there is a requirement to return to the question Professor Samuel P. Huntington raised in the 1950s, when he asked of the US Navy “[w]hat function do you perform which obligates society to assume responsibility for your maintenance?” As Huntington pointed out, failure to answer this question adequately is a reason why individual services do not enjoy public support. If the rationale for maintaining specific naval capabilities and the consequences of failing to do so are crystal clear, the ambivalence to maritime security should go away. So, if the Canadian Navy can answer Huntington’s question to everybody’s satisfaction, there could well be a return to 20/20 maritime vision.

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Notes

1. “Ministers Accused of ‘Sea Blindness’ by Britain’s Most Senior Royal Navy Figure,” Telegraph, 12 August 2010.
3. Ibid.