Plain Talk: Dollars and Disasters: Time to Ante Up

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For the past nine years, the Canadian Forces (CF) have focused on Afghanistan. That commitment, with 2,900 personnel deployed along with hundreds of pieces of equipment, has shaped Canada’s military for the next decades, for better or worse. But what happens after the troops come home? Sure, the CF has proven its combat capability, but given the high costs of this protracted venture, politicians will be unlikely to send soldiers into battle again any time soon.

Canadians will probably want to keep the CF home for a while, looking after the Arctic, protecting fisheries, intercepting smugglers, working with American allies and occasionally participating in NATO exercises. However, there is one role for which Canadians would be willing to dispatch an expeditionary force, and that’s humanitarian assistance. Given that natural disasters are a fact of life, and that climate change is expected to increase the frequency and intensity of those disasters, the CF will increasingly be called upon to help out in the event of hurricanes, tsunamis, floods and earthquakes around the globe.

The Liberal government recognized the importance of the humanitarian assistance role but it connected it to the combat role. In its 2005 International Policy Statement (IPS), it talked about failed and failing states, and noted, “[i]n these demanding and complex environments, ... our military must be prepared to perform different missions – humanitarian assistance, stabilization operations, combat – all at the same time.”

The ‘three block war’ (combat, stabilization and humanitarian assistance operations all occurring at the same time and in close proximity) figured prominently and the IPS talked about the blurring of the line between peace and war. It noted that

These situations are volatile, and a humanitarian mission can swiftly turn into a combat operation.... They call for a wide variety of tools, from negotiation, compromise and cultural sensitivity to precision weapons. The aim is always to produce focused effects that put a premium, even in conflict situations, on the sanctity of human life. Consequently, the Canadian Forces will seek to maintain the right mix of military capability to ensure that they can carry out all potential aspects of a three-block war.

In contrast, the Conservative government’s 2008 Canada First Defence Strategy (CFDS) separates humanitarian assistance from combat operations. The government notes the threats to international security posed by “ethnic and border conflicts, fragile states, resurgent nationalism and global criminal networks” but limits its discussion of humanitarian assistance operations to the North American context. The CFDS points out that:

Over the last decade, our military has been called upon to assist civil authorities in dealing with a number of natural disasters, including floods in Manitoba and Quebec, the ice storm in Eastern Canada, and forest fires in British Columbia. As Hurricane Katrina has shown in the United States, such disasters will continue to occur, often with devastating consequences, and the citizens affected will expect immediate responses.

The government does not designate ‘humanitarian assistance’ as a primary role for the Canadian Forces. It does say, however, that for Canada to be a credible player on
the world stage, the CF need to have the capabilities “to make a meaningful contribution across the full spectrum of international operations, from humanitarian assistance to stabilization operations to combat.”

Unfortunately that is a rather vague statement that provokes a lot of questions, not least of which are about the humanitarian assistance role. What does this mean to the navy? Does the navy need different kinds of ships to fulfill the humanitarian assistance role or is what it has now sufficient? Is sending a warship to help out after an earthquake overkill or an effective use of limited resources?

The navy has not been involved in a lot of humanitarian missions over the last 20 years, but when deployed, it has made a significant contribution. When a major earthquake hit Haiti on 12 January 2010, Canada responded immediately, with troops, airlift and ships, including a civilian roll-on roll-off cargo ship that is kept under contract to the CF. HMCS Athabaskan and Halifax departed Halifax on 14 January, loaded with supplies and arrived in Haiti five days later.

Athabaskan anchored off Leogane and Halifax off Jacmel. Athabaskan provided a headquarters for the joint task force until a shore base could be established. Personnel from both ships provided security at aid distribution centres, cleared rubble, dug latrines, cleared trees, built shelters, serviced machinery and provided medical aid. Athabaskan’s Sea King helicopter was used to transport passengers, supplies and tanks of potable water. Particularly important in the early days was the fact that the ships, equipped with reverse osmosis desalination systems, were able to produce potable water – over the course of their one-month deployment, Athabaskan delivered 32,760 litres and Halifax delivered 184,930 litres of clean water to Haitians.

While the mission was perceived as a success, the fact is the navy was having to make do with ships not suited to the task. What was really needed was a supply ship with many times the carrying capacity. However, HMCS Protecteur, on the West Coast, was too far away to arrive in time to help, and HMCS Preserver was in refit on the East Coast. Since paying off HMCS Provider in 1998, the navy has been without a third auxiliary-oiler-replenishment (AOR) ship.

The same situation arose in 2005 when Hurricane Katrina devastated the Gulf Coast region. At that time Preserver was just coming out of a refit and not ready for operations, so Canada sent the warships HMCS Ville de Québec, Athabaskan and Toronto to help out. The ships delivered supplies, navy divers helped to clear debris, and the crews helped in reconstruction efforts.

While the navy rose to the challenge and was able to provide ships and personnel to these international relief operations, it could have done more with the right ships. If the government intends for the navy ‘to make a meaningful contribution’ to future humanitarian assistance operations, it needs to ante up the money for at least three – even better, four – Joint Support Ships.

The government has committed to spending $9 billion on new fighter aircraft – through a sole-source contract award – but maybe it should also be looking at the benefits of acquiring more of the multi-purpose support ships. These ships, with slightly more capability than the current AORs if fully outfitted, will be available to support naval task groups, provide support to land forces, host a joint task force headquarters, and offer medical/hospital services to stricken areas of the globe. However, one ship can only be in one place at one time, and there will likely come a time when there will be a conflict of priorities. Having three ships would mean at least one ship would be available 95% of the time (as opposed to 65% availability with a fleet of just two). It would also mean that the navy would be able to respond with the appropriate vessel to more than one crisis at a time.

It’s all about flexibility. No one knows what the future will bring, but it’s a sure thing that the navy’s importance in a multi-polar, climate-changing world will not decrease. So if Canadians are to respond with compassion and capability, the government has to increase what it plans to spend on its naval force.

Notes
2. Ibid., pp. 26-27.

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