

Editorial

Time for a Canadian Pacific Pivot?¹

A country deploys its navy using any number of rationales. Certainly the perception of the threat plays a large role. In both World War II and the Cold War the dominant oceanic threat was enemy submarines cutting the Atlantic sea lanes to Europe. Alliance commitments reinforced Canada's Atlantic-dominant posture, and this led to the majority of the Royal Canadian Navy (RCN) being based in Halifax.

Trade has also guided naval deployments but until now this was not a significant determinant in Canadian naval basing. Under the government of Stephen Harper this may change. Defence Minister Peter Mackay seemed to confirm this in Singapore this June, declaring that the Canadian military had "dialed up" its presence in the region as part of a wider plan to get the Canadian government admitted to critical Asian trade forums.²

Canada's trade is not the only new input to naval posture. It would be hard for Canada to ignore the recent US 'Pacific Pivot,' its just-released National Strategy for the Arctic Region, and other elements of what has become known as the Obama Doctrine. Over 70% of Canadian trade is with the United States. Military strategy and trade are linked.

The Atlantic

Given these new factors, the RCN's current 'Three Ocean' posture needs review. Despite recent efforts to conclude a Canada-European Union (EU) trade agreement, the government is concerned that Canada is too dependent on trade with slow- or no-growth economies, such as those in Europe. Unsurprisingly the Harper government wants a greater focus on trade with the rapidly growing, younger economies of Asia and the South.

Europe also suffers from being on the wrong side of the Obama Doctrine. This policy argues that the United States cannot do it all in the world and that it expects lead states in a region to take greater responsibility in meeting local security challenges. Declining European defence spending and a lack of will are problematic here. Initially only two European states joined the aggressive response to the 2011 Libyan civil war. A month later only seven of the 27 EU states had committed to combat missions.

However, Europe and North America are united in NATO – the world's only effective security organization. NATO leads the worldwide military interoperability effort to which Canada contributes significantly while also benefitting directly from it. Moreover, cutting commitments to Europe while expecting a new trade deal has



Credit: Internet

This photo illustrates the multi-state fleet participating in Rim of the Pacific (RIMPAC) 2012.

been proven a bone-headed strategy. The government of Pierre Trudeau attempted just that in the early 1970s by cutting its NATO Europe commitment while attempting to broaden Canada-European trade. The plan's rejection was summed up by German Chancellor Helmut Kohl telling Trudeau "No Tanks No Trade." All this suggests that cutting the ships that make up Canada's largest and most rapidly sent commitment to NATO must be done with skill.

The Pacific

The government's trade logic and the US Pacific 'rebalancing' – 'Pacific Pivot' is no longer used – support calls for more naval forces. The government's foreign policy plan declares that "[t]he situation is stark: Canada's trade and investment relations with new economies, leading with Asia, must deepen, and as a country we must become more relevant to our new partners."³ More specifically Defence Minister MacKay has made clear that Canada wants a seat at the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) Defence Ministers' Meeting and the indications are that Canada's defence forces will be the key to getting that seat. It is expected that membership will then provide an entry to other forums that manage Asian trade. As Canada scrambles to get involved in Asia, the US Navy is moving 60% of its ships to the Pacific, half of which will be forward deployed.

The Pacific presents challenges for Canada. The distances are immense and this means that forces must be both forward deployed and supported by significant at-sea

logistics capability to be credible. Canada has, by many reports, weak credibility in the region because it has none of this and because it has pointedly ignored the region until very recently.

The opportunities are certainly there for the RCN to play a role. The Pacific has always been a maritime theatre. Navies, amphibious forces and long-range aircraft dominated the Pacific War and they continue to dominate in the new US Air-Sea Battle doctrine. Canada could contribute CP140s and submarines to this mix but they will only be credible if they are permanently forward deployed – perhaps at Guam. Canada should also soon be able to send frigates to forward-deployed US carrier groups in the Indo-Pacific region, but they must be maintained permanently.

These deployments would also ensure that the RCN remains at the cutting edge of interoperability and provide a hedge should purely US tactical developments leave NATO behind. A Canadian task group cannot be permanently forward deployed but to be a credible response force, Canada requires a second supply ship there to cover availability gaps. In fact, a second supply ship is arguably more important to the Pacific fleet than the long-sought sixth frigate.

The Arctic

The Arctic also calls out for naval attention although the concerns here have less to do with Canada's trade than that of others. Arctic warming has already increased shipping and fishing. These are not, however, Canada's greatest security problem nor is the Northwest Passage. The fact that some 30% of the world's oil and gas is in the Arctic presents the real challenge. A recent editorial in the *Ottawa Citizen* states that "[t]he geopolitics of the Arctic melt requires Canada to join the Great Game. We either play the game, and play it well, or our nation will be the pawn of more assertive powers."⁴

Again, it is worth examining the US response. While the US Strategy for the Arctic Region hopes for a peaceful outcome to disputes, advancing US security interests is listed as the first of its three pillars. The US Navy is currently planning to increase operational capabilities and infrastructure in the Arctic with a view to operating there routinely.⁵ In parallel, the US Coast Guard outlined its extensive collaboration with the RCN in the north (so did the USN) and hinted at a potential opportunity to split responsibility – the United States covering the western Arctic and Canada the east.⁶

Given the lack of ship assets of both states, this is a good offer especially as both also lack the ability to detect and

intercept problematic activity there quickly. The NORAD example is compelling. The Arctic and Offshore Patrol Ships (AOPS) will provide a significant contributor. Regrettably, these ships will only boost security if they are naval-crewed as progress in arming the Canadian Coast Guard is slow and will fall well short of need in any case.

As there may be a need for all our submarines in the Pacific, there will likely be a need for most if not all of the AOPS to be based in Halifax. This reflects the fact that it is only 2,800 miles to the central Canadian Arctic from Halifax, where it is 4,600 miles from Victoria. This posture would also align with the option of dividing Arctic responsibilities with the United States. However, the distances to and within the Arctic are extreme, and a refueling facility at Nanisivik and at-sea logistics will be key. Thus the new *Berlin*-class supply ships will need some modest cold weather capability.



Credit: Internet

USS *Nimitz* (CVN-68) demonstrates US strike power at Rim of the Pacific (RIMPAC) 2012 off Hawaii.

Conclusions

The RCN's commitments go well beyond the three Canadian oceans. Canadian ships regularly support counter-drug operations in the Caribbean. At the same time, naval and air forces are called on to provide relief after natural disasters. These are increasing and are predicted to continue increasing because of climate change. Unless the hurricanes and earthquakes miraculously spare airports and rail systems, sea-based helicopters and over-the-shore delivery are likely to remain the surest route for relief supplies.



The Canadian *Halifax*-class frigate *HMCS Ottawa* (FFH 341) participates in a sail-past at Rim of the Pacific (RIMPAC) 2012.

The government also recognizes that Africa and other parts of the South will not always be dominated by economic under-development, conflict and disaster. Indeed, some African countries have experienced remarkable economic growth in the past decade. It seems logical to expect that the RCN will be used to advance Canada's access to those markets.

The Canadian military has partially responded to the needs of the South with drug patrols, engagement in the regional security forums and training missions. But action by military forces must be undertaken with care – many in the region are wary of gunboat diplomacy and any whiff of colonialism. The Canadian navy must tread carefully, and not jeopardise the fact that it still enjoys a superb welcome in almost every state. To maintain this, it should participate in exercises and expand its junior officer at-sea training exchanges.

The government expects the navy to support its economic goals. When trade and security were not linked, policy failure was the result. The navy has always been uniquely capable of this diplomatic work – as some wag once noted, “armoured divisions do not do courtesy calls.” Moreover, only naval units can forward deploy on a permanent basis without the need for a massive overseas base investment.

At the same time, some Asian states are aware of Canada's

past unreliability and ‘drive by’ approach to a Pacific defence presence. A country seeking greater political heft in the region via an enhanced security commitment must assign the resources to the units that can achieve this. These will be naval. They are also the forces most needed in the Arctic and in a disaster response. This may not mean a bigger total defence budget but one must ask why the navy has the lowest priority in that budget and the fewest personnel of the three services. 🍷

Eric Lerhe

Notes

1. Much of the material here was obtained at the superb Naval Association of Canada conference on the Asia-Pacific region and its impact on the Canadian Navy held in Victoria, BC, on 7 June 2013.
2. Campbell Clark, “Defence Minister Presses China to take Regional Disputes to UN,” *The Globe and Mail*, 4 June 2013, pp. A1, A12.
3. Greg Weston, “Harper Government Leaked Canadian Foreign Policy Plan, Secret Document Details New Canadian Foreign Policy,” *CBC News*, 19 November 2012.
4. Editorial, “Our Arctic Rights,” *Ottawa Citizen*, 17 May 2013.
5. Rear-Admiral Jon White, the US Navy's director of Task Force Climate Change has stated “[t]he US Navy is currently engaged in strategic planning to increase operational capabilities and infrastructure in the Arctic in future years. Within the next decade. I believe we'll be operating entirely in the Arctic with an appropriate presence that includes more than just submarines.” Cited in Bob Freeman, “New National Strategy for the Arctic Region has Implications for Navy,” 15 May 2013, available at www.navy.mil/submit/display.asp?story_id=74168.
6. Sydney J. Freedberg Jr., “Coast Guard to Navy: Arctic's Covered; White House OKs Arctic Icebreaker,” breakingdefense.com, 21 May 2013.