

Is it Time for a New Concept of Canadian Seapower?

Canada is heading into a new, dangerous and rapidly transforming geopolitical maritime environment. Now is the time for rethinking what constitutes Canadian seapower and how it will be used to defend Canadian national security. New weapon technologies are being developed, and in some cases are already being tested, that will rewrite how maritime battles will be fought and won in the future. But even more significantly, the existing geopolitical framework is entering a state of flux with serious ramifications for Canada. Historically, Canadian leaders have protected Canadian maritime security by tying Canada to the strongest maritime power. First it was the British and now it is the Americans. Therefore, existing concepts of Canadian seapower have been straightforward – develop a navy that can fight alongside the biggest and strongest navy in a specialized role. These were hard roles but ones that did not require considerable independent thought. Once the specific role was picked, the challenge was learning and maintaining the ability to engage in the task, no further strategic thought was required. However, this will soon change.

Canada is in the process of rebuilding its navy – it is building or preparing to build replacements for its frigates, destroyers and replenishment vessels. In addition, for the first time since the 1950s, a class of patrol vessels for the Arctic is being added to the fleet. This is one of the most substantial procurement policies for the Royal Canadian Navy (RCN) since the end of the Second World War. Questions arise, such as how will this new fleet defend Canadian security into the 2060s, and when will the fleet need to be replaced? It is highly likely that the ships will not simply follow the roles of their predecessors. Rather they need to be prepared for new roles based on different concepts of Canadian seapower that need to be much more independent and fluid than they have been in the past. Canada will need a navy that can fight alone and for more specific Canadian objectives and less for allied objectives.

There are at least five new types of technologies that require a rethink of how navies respond to threats, including: hypersonic long-range missiles; underwater autonomous systems; Artificial Intelligence; cyber warfare; and directed energy weapons. While space limitation precludes a detailed consideration of the impacts of these new technologies, it is possible to offer some observations. The naval battlefield of the next 40 years is one in which the speed and range of conflict will be greatly enhanced. An attack by an enemy armed with long-range,

manoeuvrable hypersonic weapons will threaten to overwhelm most existing defensive systems. If such an attack were to occur at the same time that the same naval units were also attacked by underwater autonomous vehicles, the complexity of the defensive response is apparent. The development of Artificial Intelligence systems also suggests that it will become increasingly possible for a future enemy to launch a coordinated attack that will be beyond the ability of existing defensive systems to counter. Going into the future, Canadian naval vessels will need to be able to defend and fight at a much higher rate of action or have the means to avoid conflict in the first place.

Complicating this, Canada does not have the ability to develop its own national responses to these technological threats and will continue to depend on its allies for the technical means to respond. But unlike in past years when Canada made some contributions to new technologies, it will increasingly become a consumer of the defensive capabilities necessary to exist in a hostile maritime environment. This requires Canada to remain closely allied with the major maritime powers.

There are four developing geopolitical trends that could change this requirement: worsening relations with the United States; disintegrating relations with European NATO allies; stagnant or deteriorating relations with like-minded Asian states; and challenges from new or renewed enemies. These trends may require fundamental rethinking of how Canada uses seapower to protect its national interests in the coming decades.



A hypersonic weapon is fired from a B-52 bomber in this August 2020 graphic from Lockheed Martin. New technologies and potential shifts in geopolitical concerns require Canada to rethink how and for what purpose its seapower is employed.

Credit: Lockheed Martin



Credit: Maritime Task Force - OP Reassurance, DND

A sailor stands watch while HMCS Fredericton transits the Bosphorus Strait in Istanbul during Operation Reassurance 4 March 2015. Turkey's foreign policy has come under increasing criticism from other NATO members in recent years, calling into question its future position in the alliance.

Since the Second World War, Canada's relationship with the United States has been the core means to defend Canadian security. Canadian concepts of seapower are tied to those of the United States with Canada as a junior partner. What happens if the United States does not want or does not value that relationship in the future? The way the administration of Donald Trump has acted is a disturbing reminder that it is dangerous for Canadians to assume that the relationship will always be without fundamental challenge. It is possible that Trump is an anomaly and that once he is gone from office, relations between Canada and the United States will return to normal. However, it is also possible that he has unleashed forces that will change the relationship with Canada. The special relationship may not be so special. This could mean that Canada's ability to integrate so closely with the United States in terms of maritime security is lost. This would require that Canada develop an ability to act on its own when the United States will not stand with it.

It is also clear that unfriendly outside forces are learning to attack the solidarity of the Western alliance system through social media and other new tools. Significant divisions are developing and many suspect that these forces – probably led by Russia and China – will intensify their efforts to sow discord. Social media has already played a key role in dividing the UK from the European Union. Can Turkey and Hungary's continued participation in NATO be counted upon? What about other members? What does Canada need in terms of naval power to protect its maritime relations and trade with Europe (and the UK) if the NATO alliance is reduced or lost?

Canada's relationships with like-minded Asian states, such as Australia, Japan, South Korea and India, is equally confounding going into the future with major impacts for the RCN. Canadian policy-makers continually dismiss Asian initiatives to contain China and seem unable to build strategic relations with Japan, India and Australia. As China's power grows, these states are now developing new relations amongst themselves and redeveloping their own naval capabilities. Canada has always had a desire to develop its capabilities in the Pacific region but its continuing inability to work strategically with these countries will keep it isolated in the region. As China grows more powerful, what will Canada need to do with these like-minded states to protect its interests and security? This will involve Canadian seapower but the question is what will it look like, and how can it be done?

Finally, Canada has enjoyed a period of peace and stability since the end of the Cold War in which it could pick conflicts that it wanted to join, and always did so in concert with others. The geopolitical reality was that Canada did not face any direct threat. This is now changing. As Russia has rebuilt its strength, it has also become increasingly assertive against Western interests. This can be seen in an increase in naval activity and challenges to Western naval actions. But even more challenging is the development of China as a near-peer competitor to the United States. China now has the second largest navy in the world in terms of offensive power (some have said it has the largest navy, depending on how and what you count). It has amazed most observers with the speed of its naval procurements as well as its determination to become a naval power of the highest rank, willing to use its power to defend its interests – a fact of which Canada has increasingly been made aware in recent times.

Ultimately the combination of a new fleet, a new maritime weapon environment and a new geopolitical reality means that Canada needs to think about how it will use the navy in the coming years. The question is how does Canada prepare to use the navy that it is now starting to build? It cannot continue as it has in the past. It will face revolutionary changes to both weapon technologies and Canada's position in the world. Does Canada retreat to do nothing and hope no one notices, or does it start to prepare for a future in which the possibility of conflict with China and/or Russia increases at a time when Canada's relations with its allies and friends are uncertain? Now is the time to start thinking about what the future of Canadian seapower will look like. It must be a future in which Canadian seapower is more independent but robust and ready to meet the challenges of the next 40 years. 🍷

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