

# Editorial

## Drifting?

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It is hard not to feel discouraged these days. We've gone from the optimism of the 1990s to the cynicism and anger of the 2020s. Democracy is under siege everywhere and authoritarians have increasing confidence. There had been virtually no military coups for decades but since 2020 the news is full of coups. The war in Ukraine shows no sign of ending, and indeed it's difficult to see how it will end. Temperatures soared over the summer and wild fires burned across Canada (and other countries). While apparently suffering economic slowdown, China continues to push against its neighbours and woos states with its anti-US/West rhetoric.

But this is a journal about defence, navies and maritime issues, so perhaps we should move on from these global problems. Let us focus on defence policy, the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF), the Royal Canadian Navy (RCN) in particular.

I find it puzzling that as the world burns – literally in some places – a sense of urgency is nowhere to be found among Canadian politicians. The word *drifting* comes to mind. Indeed, one gets the sense that things are drifting along like leaves floating on a river. The 'quick' update to the 2017 defence policy *Strong, Secure, Engaged* announced in 2022 has, at the time of writing, yet to be completed. Prime Minister Justin Trudeau has made it clear that Canada will not be meeting the NATO benchmark of 2% of Gross Domestic Product allocated to defence – not now

and probably not ever.<sup>1</sup> The Cabinet shuffle that was made in July 2023 to 're-energise' the government has installed a Minister of National Defence in whom few people have a lot of faith.

But it is not just the government that seems to drift. The fourth Arctic and Offshore Patrol Ship (AOPS) – HMCS *William Hall* – was handed over to the RCN on 31 August, and the fifth AOPS will be in the water shortly. And yet, what are the ships doing? According to the publicity material, in addition to 'offshore' work, they were going to spend the summer months in the Arctic, increasing Canada's presence there. But only one AOPS went North this year to participate in the annual operation there. Rumour has it that other AOPS did not go because of crew shortages. Fair point – personnel shortages are indeed a huge problem (as discussed below). But if the problem is a shortage of *trained* crews, that is a different story. Why is there a shortage of trained crews? The ships did not appear overnight. And if the lack of AOPS in the Arctic this summer is because the Nanisivik Naval Facility is not yet fully functional, then perhaps some urgency could be applied to make it functional.

The Canadian Surface Combatant (CSC) project tootles along at snail-like speed, still in the design phase after years of designing. 'Canadianization' is of course necessary, but wasn't one of the competition requirements for the ship that the design be 'mature'? Despite being involved in design discussions, the builder has only now asked for money to rebuild its facility to accommodate the ship, and the date for completion has been extended yet again. And, although the two Joint Support Ships received names in 2017, even the first ship has not yet been built.

We all know that procurement is a problem. It's glacially slow and painful – most projects are far behind schedule and way over budget. This could be explained by saying that the National Shipbuilding Strategy (NSS) is a huge and complex project and it takes time to get up to speed. Again, fair point. There had been basically no naval procurement for years, so building capacity could take time. It has, however, been 13 years since the NSS was announced. And procurement was problematic before the NSS. When in office, both Conservatives and Liberals have vowed to fix the system, and yet it doesn't get fixed. The new Minister of National Defence seems unlikely to do so.

As noted, personnel shortages are acute. In this, military leaders have acted decisively, in the RCN's case by setting up the Naval Experience Program. However, military leaders could have acted much more quickly and forcefully to address the sexual harassment scandal that



Credit: Timothy Choi

*Is Canadian defence adrift in increasingly turbulent global waters?*



The MAST-13 (now known as Madfox) Autonomous Surface Vehicle, is seen leaving the loading dock of HMS Albion in March 2020 off Norway.

has soured many people about the military. And, unfortunately, the actions to boost recruitment, and stop the bleed of people leaving the CAF, may take years to bear fruit. Perhaps fixing the bottlenecks in procurement and sending some paper-shufflers in Ottawa back to serve on ships would be a temporary help. But training must not be sacrificed – indeed it must be enhanced as technology and warfare evolve.

Several articles in *CNR* have discussed uncrewed and autonomous maritime vessels.<sup>2</sup> NATO has formed a unit to facilitate the adoption of uncrewed systems, and the US Navy has invented, adopted and operated them.<sup>3</sup> And yet, publicly, little is said by the RCN about plans for these systems. If personnel shortages are so acute, is the RCN looking into using uncrewed systems? Are the CSCs being designed with uncrewed systems in mind? Technology changes quickly and organizations need to adapt. The Department of National Defence (DND) IDEaS program is a great start and has funded studies relating to Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, 3-D simulators, performance enhancement, recruiting women, analysing information using Artificial Intelligence, waste management at military bases....<sup>4</sup> These are all great. But what happens after the studies are complete? Do they get followed up and/or implemented or do they gather dust on a shelf with all the other reports? And what about systems that could reduce capability deficiencies while the CSCs are being built – or augment (replace?) submarines, or be used in hybrid conflict? We have smart people in Canada who could be developing uncrewed systems for air, surface and sub-surface activities, and indeed some Canadian companies are already developing such systems.<sup>5</sup> Hopefully there are

discussions with the RCN about their use. And hopefully the drift caused by institutional inertia and the weight of history/tradition can be overcome.

It may be that work is being done – like a duck madly paddling its feet underwater while appearing unruffled on the surface. I hope so. On the surface, however, there is little sign of urgency, particularly on the part of the government. In Canada governments of all political stripes have their ear to public opinion, and the public is not knowledgeable about the military, the RCN in particular. Although surveys indicate support among Canadians for the CAF, this support weakens when questions of financial commitment are raised. But governing is about making choices, sometimes unpopular ones, and as the world gets darker, it might be time to stop drifting and start paddling – with real purpose and commitment. 🦆

#### Notes

1. As Dave Perry writes herein, the Department of National Defence is expected to make mandated cuts like every other federal department – and DND will likely be affected disproportionately.
2. For example, in 2021, the US Navy announced the commissioning of Task Force 59 in the 5<sup>th</sup> Fleet to explore and adopt unmanned systems and artificial intelligence. As well, the USN formed Unmanned Undersea Vehicles Squadron One (UUVRON-1), and in July 2022 elevated it to a submarine force major command.
3. See for example, the 2023 essay contest winner by Cameron Meikle in this issue!
4. IDEaS stands for Innovation for Defence Excellence and Security (IDEaS). It is a federal government procurement program administered through DND.
5. For example, see “Cellula Robotics Ltd. Begins Sea Trials for its Unmanned Underwater Vehicle,” *Offshore Magazine*, 30 August 2023.

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