

The RCN and African Maritime Security: Forward Security Strikes Back?

Rob Huebert and Chris W.J. Roberts



Credit: Corporal Jaclyn Buiell, Canadian Armed Forces

Members of the Togo Military conduct a clearing exercise aboard HMCS *Moncton* off the coast of Ghana as part of Exercise *Obangame Express* during *Operation Projection* 12 March 2022.

The African continent rarely registers in the minds of Canadians during discussions of foreign and defence policy and even less when the discussion turns to maritime concerns. And yet, Canada's long experience with expeditionary operations began on that continent when 386 'Nile Voyageurs' were recruited and sent to support the Sudan campaign of General Garnet Wolseley in 1884.¹ Most recently, and by pure serendipity, in April 2023 a Royal Canadian Navy (RCN) task force headed to boost Canada's presence in the Indo-Pacific region ended up at the right place at the right time as fighting broke out between rival military factions in Sudan. Alongside HMCS *Montreal*, the RCN's sole replenishment ship MV *Asterix* served as a critical asset in the Red Sea used by multiple allied navies to assist with personnel evacuations.² The 139 years between the Nile Voyageurs' (ultimately failed) attempt to relieve General Charles George Gordon at Khartoum and the RCN's support in 2023 of successful evacuations from Sudan under *Operation Savanne* bookend numerous land, air and sea deployments by the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) to the continent.

As John Holmes said in 1987, "[t]he first priority of Canadian defence policy is not and has not been for a century the defence of Canada ... [it] is the defence of an international system favourable to our security and survival."³ What is almost always neglected in any such considerations is the role that the RCN has played when Canada has acted in Africa.

Canadians are likely to have minimal appreciation for the developing use of Canadian seapower in African waters. This is a development which requires more strategic focus and rationale, both to avoid policy whims and

misinterpretations but also to enhance intended effects. Assessment of recent Canadian naval deployments indicates that African waters are becoming increasingly important for Canadian applications of seapower far from Canada's 'traditional' maritime regions. While this is not a new development – the RCN helped to deploy and sustain peacekeepers in Suez in the 1950s, supported humanitarian intervention in Somalia in the early 1990s and anti-piracy efforts in the late 2000s, and frigates were integral to the 2011 United Nations-authorized military operations against the Muammar Gaddafi regime in Libya – the challenge in understanding the recent regularization of Canadian seapower in African waters remains. Too often these deployments are understood as discrete events, not in relation to the African continent as an important geopolitical subject of its own.

A review of 114 expert submissions to the defence policy review process in 2016 indicates that only eight experts referenced Africa in any way.⁴ The updated *Leadmark 2050* mentioned the continent eight times in 2016,⁵ and the 2017 Canadian defence policy, *Strong, Secure, Engaged* (SSE), mentioned the continent nine times.⁶ However since 2017, RCN attention to building relationships with African navies and experience in African waters has increased.⁷

There has not been any systematic consideration of why the RCN increasingly deploys to African waters compared to the analysis of Canadian seapower elsewhere. Even before the new Indo-Pacific Strategy (IPS) was released in November 2022, analysis of Canadian security policy in the *Indo-* part of the Indo-Pacific region often failed to mention Africa,⁸ even though East Africa, including various island states, makes up the western boundary of the Indian Ocean.

There is no official pronouncement or policy on Canada's projection of seapower around the continent. However, SSE provides some minimal clues, as does the more recent attention to broader policy adjustments. There are diplomatic and economic cooperation issues on which the Canadian government is working to incorporate in new strategies for foreign and trade policy in relation to the African region.⁹ So, why is Canada not prioritizing these deployments on an ongoing basis? And, if this reorientation makes sense, what might be done better?

This discussion of Canadian seapower and African maritime security will first examine the presence of the RCN around the continent since 2017 including operations, exercises and 'defence diplomacy.' Second, it will examine SSE and the RCN's *Leadmark 2050* which provide some of the strategic context for those deployments, while identifying how Canadian deployments are slotting into American grand strategy. Finally, a deeper analysis of Africa in the context of Canadian seapower provides some initial considerations for maximizing limited resources towards security and other foreign policy objectives. Deploying to the continent is not an easy task and there are clearly opportunity costs involved when vessels and personnel are not being sent elsewhere. These deployments are neither an aberration nor unwarranted, but they are ripe for strategic assessment and refinement.

Canadian Seapower 'Surge' in African Waters since 2017

What are some of the operations and exercises the RCN has undertaken in African waters in recent years? In 2019, the RCN deployed ships along both the West and East

coasts of the African continent for extended periods, as well as in the Mediterranean. An entire Canadian headquarters staff under Commodore Darren Garnier commanded Combined Task Force 150 (CTF 150) from Bahrain between December 2018 and April 2019. CTF 150 is the multilateral mission under Combined Maritime Forces (CMF), a coalition of 39 states that has worked to promote security and stability in Middle Eastern and East African waters since 2001. Commodore Josée Kurtz took command of Standing NATO Maritime Group Two (SNMG2) in the Mediterranean in June 2019, with HMCS *Toronto* as her flagship. A separate initiative in Tunisia during 2016-2019 trained naval personnel in board-and-search operations.

At the beginning of 2021, Canadians took over leadership positions for two separate multilateral maritime commands around the African continent. Commodore Bradley Peats assumed command of Standing NATO Maritime Group One (SNMG1), which has responsibilities in northern Atlantic waters but has also operated off Africa. Commodore Dan Charlebois assumed command of CTF 150, the fifth time for a Canadian. While it is unusual to have two major multilateral naval missions commanded by Canadians concurrently, the fact is that both missions operate astride Africa and have in the past conducted operations and exercises in African waters. The RCN also resumed, after a one-year hiatus due to Covid-19, its annual winter training cruise that commenced in 2017 which sends two *Kingston*-class maritime coastal defence vessels (MCDVs) to West Africa as part of *Operation Projection-West Africa*.

In addition to *Operation Projection*, since 2017 the RCN has been a regular participant in the American-coordinated Obangame Express exercise in the Gulf of Guinea, followed by Phoenix Express off North Africa in 2018. During the 2018 cruise across the Atlantic, exchange officers from Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire were aboard Canadian vessels. While in West Africa, the ships and their crews conducted a range of activities, from improving maritime domain awareness and building strategic relationships with partner navies, to training and exercises focused on interdiction and boarding.¹⁰ Table 1 highlights RCN deployments to West African waters since 2017.

It has become clear that the small size of the *Kingston*-class vessels eased port of call options as well as enhanced training alongside West African navies that mostly possess patrol vessels not frigates or larger ships. So, lower operating costs, vessel size, crew size, relevant capabilities and roles all make sense for training, operations and defence diplomacy purposes in West Africa. Defence diplomacy also plays a big part of port calls,¹¹ from hosting local military and political leaders aboard to crews' community



Members of the US Navy and Naval Replenishment Unit *Asterix* assess plans for maritime coordination in support of *Operation Savanne* onboard MV *Asterix* in the Red Sea on 28 April 2023.

Credit: SI Taylor Congdon, Canadian Armed Forces

outreach to meet local kids, play sports, repair facilities and, often, highlight women's roles as leaders and skilled crewmembers as examples for local women and girls.

In addition to the regularization of these annual deployments (except 2021 due to Covid-19 restrictions), the RCN has quickly expanded its contact with navies across West Africa. Some countries, including Togo, received their first Canadian naval visit ever. Each deployment can involve five or more port calls plus interactions with additional African navies during exercises. In a few short

years, the RCN has established both regular relationships and expectations of ongoing Canadian presence in the region. That the incidents of piracy in the Gulf of Guinea have dropped over the last few years cannot be attributed to the annual weeks-long presence of two small Canadian warships, but Canada's presence, training and support of regional capacity certainly enhances regional efforts under the 10-year old Yaoundé Code of Conduct.¹²

CMF-related activities in East Africa, participation in the American-led Phoenix Express exercise with North

Table 1. RCN Deployments to West Africa/Gulf of Guinea since 2017

2017-2023 Operation Projection - West Africa 2017-2023			
Dates	RCN Ships	Visits and/or navy contacts	Exercises
In 2017, the training task force sailed to West Africa under Neptune Trident 17-01			
(1) 18 Feb-May 2017	HMCS <i>Summerside</i>	Freetown, Sierra Leone	Obangame Express 2017
	HMCS <i>Moncton</i>	Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire	
		Dakar, Senegal	
		Monrovia, Liberia	
Beginning in 2018, Operation Projection - West Africa			
(2) 26 Jan-April 2018	HMCS <i>Kingston</i>	Lagos, Nigeria	Obangame Express 2018
	HMCS <i>Summerside</i>	Dakar, Senegal	Phoenix Express 2018/land
		Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire	
		Monrovia, Liberia	
		Ghana, Benin, Cape Verde	
		Togo, Guinea navies (at sea)	
(3) Jan-April 2019	HMCS <i>Shawinigan</i>	Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire	Obangame Express 2019
	HMCS <i>Kingston</i>	Cotonou, Benin	Phoenix Express 2019/sea
	Command teams 50% female/male	Lomé, Togo	[Casablanca, Morocco]
		Takoradi, Ghana	
		Dakar, Senegal	
		Monrovia, Liberia	
(4) 26 Jan-9 April 2020	HMCS <i>Glace Bay</i>	Porto Grande, Cape Verde	Obangame Express 2020
	HMCS <i>Shawinigan</i>	(Recalled March 17th due to Covid-19)	Phoenix Express 2020
			Exercises cancelled/Covid-19
No deployment in 2021 due to Covid-19			
(5) 20 Jan-15 April 2022	HMCS <i>Goose Bay</i>	Freetown, Sierra Leone	Obangame Express 2022
	HMCS <i>Moncton</i>	Accra/Tema, Ghana	
		Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire	
		Lagos, Nigeria	
		Dakar, Senegal	
		Togo, Benin Navies	
(6) 9 Jan-28 Feb 2023	HMCS <i>Glace Bay</i>	Cape Verde	Obangame Express 2023
	HMCS <i>Moncton</i>	Ghana	Feb. 28 retasked to Operation Globe/Haiti patrols
		Sierra Leone	
		Côte d'Ivoire	
		Liberia	
		Nigeria	

Credit: Provided by Authors

Table 2. RCN Interactions since 2017

REGION	AFRICAN NAVIES
West Africa	Benin
	Cape Verde
	Côte d’Ivoire
	Ghana
	Guinea
	Liberia
	Nigeria
	Senegal
	Sierra Leone
Togo	
North Africa	Algeria
	Egypt (CMF)
	Mauritania
	Morocco
	Tunisia
Eastern and Southern Africa	Comoros
	Djibouti (CMF)
	Kenya (CMF)
	Mozambique
	Seychelles (CMF)
Tanzania	

CMF = Combined Maritime Forces.

African navies and small-scale Maritime Tactical Operations Group capacity-building with the Tunisian Navy between 2016 and 2019 expand the network of recent interactions with West African navies to include many in North and East Africa. This interaction has resulted in an extensive network of partner relationships across more than half of African coastal states. Table 2 lists African navies with which RCN ships or personnel have interacted since 2017.

Overall, the RCN has not been this active in African maritime domains since the Second World War. This is the result of regionally-focused operations and exercises, and adjacent deployments in or near African waters including NATO, CMF and the recent *Operation Projection* task force to the Indo-Pacific region that put *Asterix* and *Montreal* near Sudan at the right time.

Domestic and International Policy Dimensions of Canadian Seapower and Africa

In a 2016 survey of 25 Canadian experts about how Canada should best engage in African security issues, there was limited consensus on specific policy ideas and priorities. However, one area of significant agreement was that the RCN “should play a bigger role in partnership with African navies and coast guards in terms of training, human smuggling and narcotics interdiction, and counter-piracy and [counter-]illegal fisheries patrols.”¹³ This also seems to have garnered consensus among policy-makers and planners in Ottawa. In the 2016 *Leadmark 2050* update, alongside regular references to frigate contributions to anti-piracy off the coast of Somalia from 2008, there are various forward-looking suggestions about operations in the Gulf of Guinea. This includes an imaginary vignette of a future deployment of two *Harry DeWolf*-class Arctic and Offshore Patrol Ships (AOPS), with a Cyclone helicopter detachment, conducting maritime surveillance, interdiction and local capacity-building with coastal states.¹⁴ The entire vignette outlines the suitability of AOPS for distant, warm-water operations, fulfilling a range of tasks including those mentioned above plus defence diplomacy and inter-governmental cooperation. Despite their Arctic patrol duties, the AOPS are equipped with air conditioning whereas the *Kingston*-class vessels are not. However, none have yet conducted any cross-Atlantic deployments. Still, *Leadmark 2050* signalled RCN expectations for a greater presence in West African waters and acknowledged past, and potentially future, demands for anti-piracy and counter-terrorism tasks elsewhere.

While the promised defence policy update still seems far off, *SSE* provides some rationale for those regular *Kingston*-class deployments to West Africa. There is no mention of maritime piracy or the Gulf of Guinea, but there are broader guides to Canadian security engagement in Africa. First,

SSE recognizes rising regional and economic powers in Africa and that this requires “fostering new partnerships” to promote peace within the existing international system. With a youthful population and extensive natural resources, the continent will play a central role in global economic, demographic and energy transitions for decades to come. Second, *SSE* also recognizes that while some African states have made progress towards peace and prosperity, other states “struggle with conflict and fragility” as the characteristics of conflict change and the propensity to use violence (including terrorism) increases. Conflict resolution, including multilateral peace and stabilization missions, will require that the CAF “develop stronger relationships with other multilateral partners, such as the European Union, regional actors, such as the African Union, and like-minded states, like those of the *Francophonie*, to further enhance global capacity to promote peace and stability.”¹⁵

Third, the global defence partnership section on Africa explicitly adopts an “integrated whole-of-government approach” for the defence team, invokes support for the UN Sustainable Development Goals, peace operations, development, “empowering women and girls” and stresses building new bilateral relationships. *Operation Projection-West Africa* incorporates most of these objectives.



HMCS *Goose Bay* (MM 707) and HMCS *Moncton* (MM 708) participate in a passing exercise with the Expeditionary Sea Base USS *Hershel 'Woody' Williams* (ESB 4) while sailing near Dakar, Senegal, 20 March 2022.

Fourth, *SSE* also points out the importance of working closely with traditional NATO allies. Canadian participation in US Africa Command's Obangame Express in the Gulf of Guinea, and occasional participation in Phoenix Express in the Mediterranean and Cutlass Express in East Africa, illustrates some new and sustained Canadian commitment to broader American and NATO efforts in African waters. The support provided by *Asterix* and *Montreal* to NATO partners during the Sudan evacuations in 2023 was important and may raise allied expectations about Canada's ongoing presence in African waters.

Those expectations will compete with Canada's explicit prioritization of the Indo-Pacific region, a term never used in *SSE* when the focus was on the Asia-Pacific region. Originally, 'Indo-Pacific' as a geographical construct, including under President Barack Obama, recognized the western boundary of the Indian Ocean as the East Coast of Africa including four African island states. But since a terminological change in the US National Security Strategy under the Donald Trump administration in late 2017, the emphasis on a "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" aligned geographically with US Pacific Command.¹⁶ That meant the western Indian Ocean was divided between Central Command (CENTCOM) to the North (including the Red Sea and Egypt) and Africa Command (AFRICOM) from Kenya's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) to the South.

It is no surprise, then, that neither Africa nor any specific African country is mentioned in Canada's recent Indo-Pacific Strategy.¹⁷ Canada is aligning its strategic orientation to mirror the American command structure. But that ignores how those countries situated in the Indian Ocean organize themselves (e.g., the Indian Ocean Rim Association spearheaded by South Africa and India in the mid-1990s). If Canada is going to do this for the Indo-Pacific, should it then develop a broader Africa strategy that mirrors the operational area of AFRICOM? That seems to be happening by default as Canada 'chops in' late to various multinational exercises organized by AFRICOM and works closely with CMF which effectively multilateralized CENTCOM's areas of responsibility. However, there are drawbacks to positioning Canadian support for African maritime security simply through existing American (or any outsider) policy and structures.

Conclusion: Theorizing Canadian Seapower and Africa Maritime Security

In a strange coincidence, the 386 Nile Voyageurs who set out for Sudan via Egypt in 1884 are roughly the same number as the combined crews of HMCS *Montreal* and MV *Asterix* which provided evacuation support from Sudan in the Red Sea in April 2023. The presence of these ships lends credence to the fact that ships in the right place at the right time can deliver significant operational effects. Given global economic and geopolitical trends, the RCN deployments are neither an aberration nor unwarranted, but they are ripe for strategic refinement.

If Holmes was correct about the defence of Canada, support for the rules-based order everywhere includes the African maritime domain. The absence of African capacity to control territorial waters and patrol EEZs can lead to broader systemic breakdown. Somali piracy only emerged after the collapse of the Somali state in the early 1990s – and it has been argued that the piracy developed in response to illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing, and exploitation and pollution of Somali waters by industrial fishing and shipping fleets that occurred without consequences in the absence of a functioning state.¹⁸ Thus, the integration of African maritime security into Canadian forward security and seapower thinking would be a sign of a maturing strategic outlook.

There are additional considerations that support current trends but could also influence future procurements and planning. First, Canada needs to take Africans' agency over their maritime domains seriously. Where possible, Canada should differentiate its maritime partnership in African waters from others (United States, France, UK, NATO, China, Russia, India, etc.) especially in relation to IUU fisheries, pollution and biodiversity protection (e.g., support of new High Seas Treaty objectives), port security, and smaller vessel training and capacity building. As well, Canada should consider exercises outside AFRICOM or CMF frameworks which could include support for peace, humanitarian, or climate-response operations training (some African navies have capabilities that the RCN does not). Canada shares more resource constraints with African navies than large vessel, large fleet navies, and that reality can build stronger relationships especially if shared challenges and learning become a two-way street.



A model of the 'Vigilance' offshore patrol vessel proposed by Vard and SH Defence to replace the *Kingston*-class. It incorporates a larger hull and modular equipment spaces to reflect expanded mission sets and operating areas.

Second, Canadian regional and domain expertise should be built up so that it becomes a resource for both African maritime security partners and US/NATO/Indo-Pacific partners, showing direct support for the African Union's "Africa's Integrated Maritime (AIM) Strategy 2050," as well as regional and national maritime strategies. As well, Canada should investigate opportunities beyond CTF 150/151 to include the newer CTF 153 and 154 (Red Sea and overall training/capacity-building functions, respectively) initiatives of CMF.

Third, naval training and capacity building (including maritime domain awareness centres) mostly avoids dilemmas around training land forces. As the coup in Niger in July 2023 illustrates, training special forces or other army elements may have political implications. Rarely do African navies get heavily involved in domestic politics, except to plead for new ships or at least fuel to go to sea. Given their relatively small size, their offshore orientation and their ongoing struggles to retain capabilities, African navies in fragile or transitioning political systems may present low levels of partnership risk.

Fourth, few people thought that the *Kingston*-class MCDVs would end up on annual deployments to West Africa when they were first delivered in the 1990s. However, while the AOPS have been planned with that possibility in mind, they will be few in number, and their primary focus will be Canadian waters including the Arctic. AOPS are also much closer to frigate-sized and will remove the familiarity that many West African naval personnel have with ships more akin to the *Kingston*-class. While an occasional AOPS deployment to African waters will be desirable, as well as frigates and replenishment vessels, replacement design for the 12 *Kingston* MCDVs should acknowledge the likelihood of African maritime operations, incorporating lessons learned over the last few years. That might

include better ocean-crossing capability (a bit larger and faster), capability in hot weather operations, and perhaps even specific capabilities that enhance training and operational requirements of African partner navies.¹⁹

As Lieutenant-Commander Matthew Woodburn, Commanding Officer of HMCS *Kingston*, said in a 2019 interview, "[m]aritime security is not just a West African problem, it is an international problem."²⁰ If that sentiment is fully integrated into a 21st century forward security framework, the RCN will be ready and equipped to build on the last seven years of operations in African waters and relationship-building with multiple African navies. 🇺🇸

Notes

1. James Powell, "The Nile Voyageurs," The Historical Society of Ottawa, no date.
2. Federal Fleet Services, "Asterix Shows Its Mettle in Another Successful Circumnavigation," Media Release, 27 June 2023.
3. Quoted in Patrick Lennox, "John W. Holmes and Canadian International Relations Theory," *International Journal*, Vol. 65, No. 2 (Spring 2010), p. 389.
4. Alexandra Prieur, "Canada's Defence Policy Consultations and Africa: What Did the 'Experts' Say?" *Journal of Military and Strategic Studies*, Vol. 17, Issue 2 (2016), pp. 107-116.
5. Department of National Defence, Royal Canadian Navy (RCN), *Leadmark 2050: Canada in a New Maritime World* (Ottawa, 2016).
6. Government of Canada, *Strong, Secure, Engaged: Canada's Defence Policy*, released 7 June 2017.
7. Lieutenant (Navy) Linda Coleman, "The RCN Increases its Presence in Africa," *Esprit de Corps Magazine*, 22 June 2018.
8. Eric Lerhe, "How Can Canada Best Defend its Security Interests in the Indo-Pacific?" Canadian Global Affairs Institute (CGAI) Policy Perspective, July 2021.
9. See Government of Canada, "A Proposed Canada-Africa Economic Cooperation Strategy: Background for Consultations," 5 May 2023; and Dylan Robertson, "Ottawa Downgrades Long-delayed Africa Policy Despite Criticism," *Global News*, 17 May 2023.
10. The Canadian Coast Guard has also contributed land-based officers to conduct training during Obangame Express at the ECOWAS Multinational Maritime Coordination Centre (MMCC) in Ghana.
11. A good, recent overview of maritime defence diplomacy is Lieutenant-Commander Ryan G.S. Bell, "Canadian Maritime Defence Diplomacy: Canada's Ambassadors at Sea," CFC JSCP 46 Thesis, 2020.
12. Africa Center for Strategic Studies, "Ten Years of the Yaoundé Protocol: Reflections on Maritime Security in the Gulf of Guinea," 14 June 2023.
13. Unpublished survey conducted in June 2016 by Chris Roberts included 26 policy assertions with respondents agreeing or disagreeing on a five-point Likert scale. Only three assertions received a higher level of agreement.
14. RCN, *Leadmark 2050*, p. 20.
15. Government of Canada, *Strong, Secure, Engaged*, p. 84.
16. Wada Haruko, "The 'Indo-Pacific' Concept: Geographical Adjustments and their Implications," S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Singapore, Working Paper No. 326, 16 March 2020.
17. Global Affairs Canada, "Canada's Indo-Pacific Strategy," Ottawa, 27 November 2022.
18. U. Rashid Sumaila and Mahamudu Bawumia, "Fisheries, Ecosystem Justice and Piracy: A Case Study of Somalia," *Fisheries Research*, Vol. 157 (September 2014), pp. 154-163.
19. The limitations of the *Kingston*-class are known. See S.W.D. Swan, "Kingston-class Ships: Less Than Meets the Eye," *RUSI (NS)*, 1 August 2023.
20. Lieutenant-Commander Matthew Woodburn, Commanding Officer of HMCS *Kingston*, 5 April 2019 (video interview), available at <https://fb.watch/INkrhC-8W8/>.

Rob Huebert is Interim Director Centre for Military Security and Strategic Studies and Professor at the Department of Political Science at the University of Calgary.

Chris W.J. Roberts is a Fellow of the Canadian Global Affairs Institute and teaches at the Department of Political Science at the University of Calgary.