

Dollars and Sense: Giving the Canadian Coast Guard a Larger National Security Role

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During the 2025 federal election the Liberal Party of Canada committed to giving the Canadian Coast Guard (CCG) a more meaningful role in Canada's national security. Specifically, the party platform promised to "expand the reach and abilities of the Canadian Coast Guard and integrate them into our NATO defence capabilities."¹ At the time of writing, the complete implications of the move remain to be fully fleshed out. Prime Minister Mark Carney's government has, however, already moved the organization to sit under a new department, as it is now operating as a Special Operating Agency under the Department of National Defence (DND). Further, senior CCG leadership began participating in DND governance meetings over the summer of 2025.

These swift initial moves, without waiting on a fully specified revised mandate, represent timely, much-needed and long-overdue reorientation of the organization's role and mandate. As one former senior CCG official noted, given the unique role for the organization, it has always been a bit of an orphan in the federal government, as its mix of transportation safety, scientific and security activity left it an uneasy fit under the Department of Fisheries and Oceans. While the CCG may still be somewhat of an orphan, clearer direction on its national security role and having it report to the Department of National Defence may ensure it now has a better foster home.

Since the publication of the 2004 National Security Policy, the Canadian Coast Guard has operated with a vaguely defined national security mandate and little guidance as to how it could meaningfully contribute to the actual guarding of Canada's coasts. The CCG was identified as

one of the organizations (alongside the Canadian Armed Forces and RCMP) tasked with providing enhanced marine security through a six-point plan that included increased on-water presence, better coordinated action with Canadian and American partners, enhanced secure communications, and establishing a Marine Security Operation Centre.² Aside from this, the organization lacked formal direction on how it might be a more meaningful security partner, a situation exacerbated by a lack of funds to recapitalize its aging fleet until the creation of the National Shipbuilding Procurement Strategy in 2010 under the Stephen Harper government, and the expansion of CCG fleet plans under Prime Minister Justin Trudeau.

Nonetheless, albeit aged, the CCG still possesses the largest number of Canadian assets on the water and, through its fleet of icebreakers, the only government vessels capable of transiting some Canadian waters during ice season. This practical on-water presence therefore presented a meaningful opportunity to make a significant improvement to Canada's marine security posture by changing the organization's mandate and providing it with the supporting equipment to deliver on it. In recent years there were calls for exactly this type of change to both role and equipment, which could relatively quickly make a significant enhancement to Canadian operational maritime capability.³

This discussion took on a new tone in private conversations in Ottawa as 2024 approached. This is the year by which all NATO allies pledged at the 2014 Wales Summit to reach the NATO investment target of spending 2% of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) on defence. As the



Coast guard vessels from Iceland, Denmark, Canada, the United States and Norway sail together during the 2017 Arctic Guardian Exercise under the auspices of the Arctic Coast Guard Forum in Iceland.

Credit: US Coast Guard Academy



A graphic of the Multi-Purpose Icebreaker (formerly Multi-Purpose Vessel) currently being designed and to be built at Seaspan Vancouver Shipyards.

deadline and the alliance's 75th anniversary beckoned, Canada remained nowhere close to the target, and moving the CCG under the purview of the Minister of National Defence was viewed by some as a means of reaching the NATO benchmark. Indeed, Prime Minister Trudeau himself made this suggestion while defending his decision to make only a verbal commitment to reaching the 2% of GDP mark by 2030, after publishing a new defence policy that committed to reach the 1.76% spending mark during a press conference at the very end of the 2025 NATO Summit in Washington. Canada was focused only on making meaningful defence investments, he claimed, and he was not prepared to hit an arbitrary target by undertaking accounting tricks "or giv[ing] every Coast Guard member a handgun."⁴ Trudeau's comment was at once wrong mathematically and substantively. Mathematically, adding every dollar of the roughly \$2 billion a year in spending on the CCG would not have remotely closed the gap to Canada spending 2% of GDP on defence. Substantively, giving every CCG member a pistol would not on its own have made each dollar count towards the NATO expenditure target, as under the commonly agreed NATO formula to determine spending eligibility, simply equipping members with a sidearm would not have met the definition for defence expenditures.

What would make a significant portion of the CCG's annual spending, which will increase significantly as icebreaker construction at both Seaspan and Davie ramps up, count towards Canada's defence expenditures under the NATO formula is the change outlined in the 2025 Liberal platform. It specified an intent to "update their mission to face changing realities to protect our sovereignty and counter criminal activity, like the trafficking of illicit drugs. That's why we will give the Canadian Coast Guard a new mandate – and the right equipment – to conduct maritime surveillance operations to secure our coasts."⁵

This move is sensible. The greater value of the organization is in taking on an enhanced role in contributing to maritime domain awareness and helping to provide a more comprehensive surveillance picture by embarking additional sensors and communication equipment. This would ensure that it can provide enhanced collection and contribute the information as seamlessly as possible to the wider government of Canada. The addition of autonomous assets to CCG vessels could enhance this effort.

The key problem to implementing these changes will be to find the right balance between introducing as much enhanced capability as possible without affecting operational activity or introducing excessive delay in existing new build projects. Introducing new capability immediately would provide the quickest increase in maritime domain awareness, but only once it can actually be deployed operationally, and finding the right balance for both existing and future vessels will be tricky. These are good problems to work through on a path to a major enhancement of Canada's marine security and maritime defence, as well as a modest increase in Canada's eligible defence expenditures for NATO reporting. 🇺🇸

Notes

1. Liberal Party of Canada, "Liberals Release Plan to Rebuild, Reinvest, and Rearm the Canadian Armed Forces," 25 March 2025.
2. Canada, *Securing an Open Society: Canada's National Security Policy*, Ottawa: Privy Council of Canada, April 2004.
3. Chris Henderson, "A Constabulary Role for the Canadian Coast Guard?" Canadian Global Affairs Institute, 2025; Mark McWhinney, "Connecting Icebreakers to C4ISR: Ensuring the Canadian Coast Guard Doesn't 'Miss the Boat,'" Canadian Global Affairs Institute, April 2023.
4. Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, NATO Summit Press Conference, Washington DC, 11 July 2025.
5. Liberal Party of Canada, "Liberals Release Plan to Rebuild, Reinvest, and Rearm the Canadian Armed Forces."

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