

Editorial

Possibilities and Pitfalls

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It was difficult to decide what to write in this Editorial. Unlike past years, recently there have been too many defence-related announcements to discuss in one Editorial. A firehose of funding for defence has been opened in Canada, so should I discuss that? Should I discuss the new government agencies to streamline (hopefully) defence procurement and the adoption of new technology? The plan to procure new submarines, or the absorption of the Canadian Coast Guard into the Department of National Defence? The new joint forces command? Should I focus on events in the United States – i.e., the implication of the new US National Security Strategy for Canada (if any), the cancellation of the *Constellation*-class frigate program, the US strikes on boats in the Caribbean and the implications for Canadian naval operations? All of these things are important, or have the potential to be important, for the Royal Canadian Navy (RCN). Here I will make a few comments, and mention a few concerns, about some of these topics.

As noted, the government has increased the budget for defence on a scale that hasn't been seen since the 1950s. (Note that the massive increase in funding announced in the fall budget does not include funding for new submarines.) While details are still scant, the money is to support, among other things, equipment, recruitment, training, infrastructure, cyberdefence and a Canadian military industrial capability. Prime Minister Mark Carney has not only promised to meet the old NATO defence spending requirement of 2% of Gross Domestic Product

within this fiscal year, but also to meet the new 5% target. Furthermore, it has vowed to make procurement more efficient by creating a Defence Procurement Agency, led by a Secretary of State for Defence Procurement, to oversee and (hopefully) untangle the painfully slow military procurement process. Also in the process of being developed is the Defence Investment Agency to be informed by the forthcoming Defence Industrial Strategy.

These are great. But I have some concerns. First, DND has not been able to spend the money it received before this big influx of funding. How will it manage this vast increase of funds? Second, this certainly isn't the government's first attempt to make the defence procurement process more efficient. Will this one succeed? We can hope that it will but, as the saying goes, hope isn't a strategy.

Third, increasing Canada's defence industrial base and developing cutting-edge technology is a great plan – although it's unfortunate that we didn't do this in the past. In the works is the Regional Defence Investment Initiative to split funding among Canada's seven regional development agencies.¹ But several things about this worry me. It seems inefficient, particularly if each region must be allocated a specific amount of money. What happens if all the defence industry and technology start-ups are in one region but the funds must be spread to all regions? Encouraging industry development through regional agencies may reproduce the problems of the past by encouraging regions to promote projects that compete with or overlap other projects in other regions or leading to regional boondoggles. Disputes among regions is something we don't want to exacerbate.

Fourth, and this relates to the third point, another concern is that the government, like past governments, has made no secret of the fact that this increase of funds to DND is also about creating jobs. If unemployed Canadian steel and auto-workers can be retrained to work in the defence industry, I'm all for it. But the National Shipbuilding Strategy has for years illustrated that the government seems to care more about creating 'good middle-class jobs' than actually getting ships in the hands of the navy quickly and for a good price.

Fifth, I wonder how deep the commitment of Canadians is to building up what we could call 'the military-industrial complex.' Many Canadians are uncomfortable with developing and selling military (or even law enforcement) equipment – see the recent fuss about Canadian-made vehicles being sold to ICE in the United States. In light of this, how committed is the government to continuing to fund the military at such high levels? If Canadians cry for



The Chinese hospital ship *Silk Road Ark* is seen during a three-day visit to Kingston, Jamaica, in December 2025.



Sentinel-class cutters of the US Coast Guard are seen from HMCS William Hall in San Juan, Puerto Rico, on 20 June 2025 during Operation Caribbe.

butter, will the government focus on guns? Even if we assume all the stars are aligned, none of these projects will produce fruit for years – by that time, will public opinion have changed? Will the government have changed, or will it have changed priorities?

And finally, the absence of a detailed defence policy is a problem. In its absence, it is not clear what the plan is. What will this beefed-up military do? Why does it need to be beefed up? What are we defending against? What will the Canadian Armed Forces, or more specifically here the RCN, do and what roles will it be assigned? Canada is fortunate to be bordered by three oceans and a (formerly) friendly power. Can the government provide a reason for this spending other than to meet NATO guidelines?

It is possible that the absence of a new defence policy indicates that the Carney government is playing it safe in relations with the United States – which is probably wise. But without a defence policy listing priorities and/or providing long-term vision, how can the CAF be guided in spending this cash in the most effective manner? Much of the talk about defence notes that Canada needs to stop relying on the United States for military capabilities and, therefore, needs to increase its own defence infrastructure to maintain sovereignty. The problem is, of course, that issuing a frank, detailed and formal statement of defence policy would make it clear that Canada is trying to make itself less dependent on the United States, in particular by reducing the purchase of US-made military capabilities – and that would offend the delicate sensibilities in Washington. Does that mean Canada drifts along without an explicit defence policy?

And, speaking of the United States, how do current US operations affect Canadian naval operations? There has been

much talk about US Navy (USN) strikes on alleged drug runners in the Caribbean and Eastern Pacific. No one disputes the damage that drugs have done to American (and Canadian) society, but legal experts note that these strikes are illegal based on both US domestic law and international law. The RCN has been working in the region with the US Coast Guard and USN on counter-drug operations as part of *Operation Caribbe* for many years. As far as I can tell, the RCN has not sent a ship on *Op Caribbe* for some months. Is that a reaction to US operations or is it a normal pause? Canada has been careful in its language about the strikes – saying that it's 'keeping a close eye' on them. Meanwhile, the United Kingdom suspended intelligence-sharing with the United States in the Caribbean in November (although the United States denies this), Colombia also stopped sharing information, and other countries have condemned the US use of force. Interestingly, as US forces are blasting boats in the Caribbean, the Chinese navy sent its hospital ship, *Silk Road Ark*, to the area this past fall as part Mission Harmony 2025. It seems Beijing has grasped the notion of soft power.

I want to be optimistic. I think that the government plans to boost defence in Canada have the potential to re-focus defence relations, enhance industry and make the RCN a very capable navy again. But the proof will be in the pudding. 

Notes

1. Note the plan to set up a national network of Defence Innovation Secure Hubs (DISH). The Maritime DISH was announced in November 2025 located at COVE in Dartmouth, Nova Scotia.

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