Why Does Canada Have a Navy? Reflecting on the Canadian Leaders at Sea Program

John Walsh

Credit: Master Corporal William Gosse, Canadian Armed Forces

*HMCS **Regina** alongside in the port of Dutch Harbor, Alaska, during **Operation Latitude** on 25 August, 2025*

This reflection has its genesis in an exchange during a recent Canadian Leaders at Sea (CLaS) experience aboard HMCS *Regina*. To open a briefing, Captain (N) Kevin Whiteside posed what seemed like a straightforward question: why does Canada have a navy? At first, the answer appeared self-evident. Canada is bordered by three oceans, and the national motto – *a mari usque ad mare* – proclaims a country defined by maritime horizons. And yet, like all good questions, this one lingered. To be fair, it was unsettling, not in tone, but in the sobering truth at which it hinted: that many Canadians may no longer know how to answer such a question, or might even be inclined to say that the country no longer needs a navy at all. If either is true, then the society the Royal Canadian Navy (RCN) protects may well require a renewed conversation. This conversation would need to re-articulate the values and commitments that sustain not only the institution, but the democracy in whose name it serves. In that spirit, I offer these reflections, joining, in my own way, the larger dialogue that moment on *Regina* invited.

As a Classics professor, I spend my days immersed in the political and moral thought of earlier societies, studying how power has been exercised, legitimacy earned and civic freedom maintained. Captain Whiteside's question stayed with me not only as a Canadian, but also as a scholar of the ancient world. What does it mean, in a democratic society, to maintain instruments of national power? How do those instruments remain connected to the people they are meant to serve? And how does naval force contribute to safeguarding not only national territory, but the civic agency and democratic legitimacy of the country itself? The CLaS experience, and especially Captain Whiteside's challenge during his briefing, helped me begin to answer those questions and to see the navy not just as a strategic tool, but as a living expression of democratic will.

In times of peace – or even the relative peace of today – some may be tempted to view the navy as ornamental, a relic of a bygone age or merely a ceremonial symbol of statehood. But to adopt that view is not only mistaken, it is dangerous. It misjudges the political character of military power in a democracy. For a sovereign, self-governing country such as Canada, naval power is not a vestige, but a vital instrument – one that both defends the state and affirms who belongs to it.

This principle has deep roots in Western thought. In Aristotle's *Politics*, the structure of a political order is shaped by the kinds of power upon which it relies. Naval power, he argued, supports the foundations of constitutional self-government. It demands broad participation, fosters equality of contribution, and allows a polity to project influence without territorial conquest. The emergence of Athens as a naval power in antiquity was not merely a matter of military innovation, it was a catalyst for political transformation towards democracy. As Aristotle observed, the rise of the Athenian navy fostered a civic order grounded in participation and reciprocity. The triremes, small ships powered by oars, were not crewed by coerced subjects but by free citizens whose shared labour at sea embodied the egalitarian ethos of the *polis*.

Nowhere was this principle more profoundly tested than at the Battle of Salamis in 480 BCE, when the world's first democracy was confronted by the vast land empire of Persia. The battle's outcome, though tactical in form, was ideological in consequence. It affirmed that a polity governed by its citizens – answerable to law and capable of collective agency – could withstand and overcome autocratic power. In this sense, the Battle of Salamis was more than a turning point in the Greco-Persian Wars; it was a constitutional proving ground, where the resilience of democratic self-rule was vindicated at sea. Since that time, maritime power has remained closely bound to political liberty, not only through command of the oceans, but through the defence and preservation of their free navigation.

In answering Captain Whiteside's question, we might begin here. In a democracy, the rights of citizenship are not abstract ideals, they are grounded in the visible contribution of citizens to the common good. Historically, access to full civic membership has been closely tied to a group's recognised role in the defence of the state. Women, racialised minorities, LGBTQ+ individuals, and others have rightly claimed – and expanded – their place in the democratic compact not only through protest and political struggle, but through military service. While no military institution can yet fully reflect every facet of Canadian society, the RCN makes visible the growing inclusiveness of national defence. It affirms that power belongs not to a narrow class, but to the public at large, and that the legitimacy of Canadian democracy is inseparable from the diversity of those who defend it.

But this truth cannot remain assumed. Captain Whiteside's question reminds us that the ability to defend a country rests not on force alone, but on a shared understanding of the principles that make such defence necessary and just. When the rationale for national defence is lost – or when, as in this case, citizens cannot explain why they have a navy – it reveals more than a lapse in knowledge, it signals an erosion of the civic literacy that sustains democratic life. In a democracy, the articulation of that rationale is not a by-product of defence, but its precursor. It is an act of civic responsibility that must precede and sustain the will to act. For without it, a country cannot validate its own exercise of power, nor justify the strength

Credit: Da jackson, Wikimedia Commons

***Olympias**, a reconstruction of an Athenian trireme, as seen in a naval museum in Athens, 2022.*

Credit: Corporal Brendan Gamache, Formation Imaging Services

*HMCS **Ville de Québec** sails underneath the Al Salam Bridge while transiting through the Suez Canal during **Operation Horizon** on 24 May 2025.*

it claims in arms. If a country cannot – or will not – defend itself, it signals to the world that its sovereignty is conditional, and its future negotiable. Just as the rights of citizens are affirmed by their visible willingness to uphold the state, so too is a state's voice among other states, even among allies, determined by its demonstrable capacity to assume the burdens of its own defence.

Credit: S1 Mendes Bernardo

*The flight deck of HMCS **Harry DeWolf** was used for a citizenship ceremony in October 2024 off Toronto.*

In a world defined by strategic competition and shifting alliances, sovereignty is not a posture – it is a practice. Canada cannot afford to imagine its independence as a settled condition or a benevolent inheritance. It must be enacted, made legible to others, and underwritten by credible instruments of national power. The Royal Canadian Navy is central to this task. It extends Canadian agency across the maritime sphere, where the norms of global order are contested and shaped, where access to commerce and information is secured, and where presence signals resolve. In this environment, participation is not discretionary. A state cannot inhabit a moral vacuum and claim the privileges of stability while outsourcing its preservation to others. Nor can it expect influence where it has not contributed. Naval power, then, is not merely a projection of force, it is a declaration of intent and a test of seriousness. To deploy a warship is to assert that Canada is prepared to defend its interests, support the international system from which it benefits, and shoulder its share of the burden in shaping a lawful and navigable world. Without such visible expression of sovereign responsibility, legitimacy erodes, relevance fades and the idea of Canada as a coherent actor on the world stage becomes increasingly difficult to sustain.

History offers its own cautionary example for those who would ignore such truths. In the fifth century BCE, the Delian League began as a mutual defence pact, an alliance of city-states united in common cause. But as smaller members ceased contributing ships and defaulted to monetary tribute, the league's balance fractured. Athens, left

to shoulder the burden of collective security, gradually converted alliance into empire. The irony is profound – the world's first democracy, forged in resistance to tyranny, became itself an imperial hegemon. The lesson is not simply that power concentrates, it is that, without shared effort and vigilance, even institutions built to defend liberty may drift from their original noble purpose. We might call this the arc of power, the natural curve by which unbalanced responsibility bends even noble intentions toward unintended authoritarianism.

This dynamic remains true and, if the responsibility for Western security were to become even more concentrated in a single dominant power, then partnership might risk becoming dependency, and leadership indistinguishable from unilateralism. A country without the means to articulate and defend its own interests risks drifting from agency to dependency. It may retain democratic rituals, but it ceases to exercise strategic will. In time, it becomes a hingeless democracy – its doors to the world opened or closed not by its own national resolve, but at the discretion of others. This is not conjecture, but the observable risk faced by any society that lets its defence capacity and civic understanding erode in tandem. For Canada, the warning is clear: a country that does not sustain its own defence cannot expect to shape the principles by which its security is preserved. Presence is the precondition of agency; contribution, the price of voice. A strong navy ensures that Canada remains not merely a participant in the international order, but a contributor to its design and a claimant to its protections.

And so, we return to the question that began this reflection: why does Canada have a navy? In the light of both ancient lessons and present realities, the answer carries new weight. And if citizens cannot answer it – or a country cannot show them why – the country risks more than misunderstanding. It risks losing the clarity, confidence and civic will that sustain a free society. To maintain the navy is not simply to protect Canada's shores, it is to affirm our sovereignty, our standing and our shared responsibility for the country we claim. The navy fulfils its role not only in theatres of conflict, but in the conscience of the country, where the meaning of freedom is kept alive, and where the decision to defend it must always begin.

Canada is, in the fullest sense, a maritime democracy. And it will remain strong and free only so long as it chooses to act like one. To 'stand on guard for thee,' then, is no metaphor, it is a strategic and moral posture, one that must be

Credit: Royal Canadian Navy

*HMCS **Regina** fires a Harpoon missile at a littoral target during an exercise off Los Angeles on 23 October 2024.*

Credit: Master Corporal William Gosse, Canadian Armed Forces

*Marine technicians and members of 443 Squadron on HMCS **Regina** conduct a helicopter crash exercise during O**peration Latitude** on 4 September 2025.*

sustained with clarity, courage and national will. *Car ton bras sait porter l'épée* (from the French version, roughly translated as 'your arms know how to wield the sword') is not merely a lyric, it expresses a principle of democratic life. The principle is that a country's defence must be not only effective but also visible in both presence and purpose, trusted in its capacity, and upheld by the people it protects.

Through the Canadian Leaders at Sea program, I had the privilege of witnessing those ideals in practice – in the professionalism, discipline and quiet resolve of those who serve. What I saw was not just a ship in motion, but the embodiment of national sovereignty afloat, directed towards national purpose, and held together by shared principle and public trust. It affirmed Canada's enduring right to exist, to act and to shape its own future: formidable to those who would challenge it, and a self-reliant, capable partner to those who stand with it.

So, if I am asked again why we have a navy, I will know the answer. For I have seen where the strength of Canada lies – it is where its sailors are. That is where you will find the country at its most capable, its most united and its most sovereign.

That is what the navy defends. That is what the navy represents. *That* is why we have a navy.

Postscript

I wish to express my sincere gratitude to the Canadian Leaders at Sea program for the extraordinary opportunity to embark aboard HMCS *Regina*. It was a privilege to witness, first-hand, the professionalism, discipline and public purpose that define the Royal Canadian Navy.

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To the entire ship's company of HMCS *Regina*, thank you. You are a credit to the Royal Canadian Navy and to Canada. It was a privilege to witness your service – professional, committed and conducted with quiet excellence. You represent the best of this country at sea.

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