

THE CANADIAN NAVY AND CANADA'S NATIONAL INTERESTS IN THIS MARITIME CENTURY

Vice Admiral Dean McFadden, Canadian Navy

In my centennial message at the beginning of [the Spring 2010] issue of the *Canadian Naval Review*, I reflected briefly on our history as a navy. In this article, I will offer my reflections on the future. While no one can predict exactly what will happen in the decades ahead, I am confident in stating two things about the

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21st century. First, the oceans will be of increasing importance to Canada's security and prosperity. Second, virtually every defence and security challenge I can envisage will require that Canada integrate all of the elements of the Canadian Forces—in fact, the entire arsenal of skills and competencies that this country has at its disposal—if it is to succeed.

The aim of this article is not to focus on *how* the Canadian Forces must organize to meet challenges, but rather *what* these challenges are likely to be, and *why* they should matter to Canadians. I will argue, as you might expect, that Canada's maritime air and naval forces will make a substantial contribution to addressing these challenges, as they did in the past 100 years and as they do today, as was so recently evident in Haiti, Vancouver and off the Horn of Africa. But first, let me explain why the 21st century will be a maritime century.

Today's global maritime order is based on a delicate geopolitical and juridical balance between two central but essentially competing ideas that have existed in a state of tension for some 500 years. These ideas are:

- *mare liberum*, the concept that the seas *cannot* be made sovereign and hence are free for all to use; and
- *mare clausum*, the idea that the seas *can* be made sovereign to the limits of effective state control.

The delicate balance was achieved not through bloodshed, but rather through an unprecedented degree of international consultation in the closing decades of the 20th century to reconcile the vital interests of the great maritime powers with the interests of coastal states. That balance was precisely what the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) achieved, making this landmark international treaty arguably the crowning legal achievement in history.

Few states have benefitted as much from the Law of the Sea treaty as Canada. It has endowed us with an immense ocean estate, one that extends beyond our shores to encompass the riches of more than 3.5% of the planet's entire surface. This represents a priceless inheritance for generations to come, with inalienable sovereign authority over nearly one-half of this massive oceanic reach, but as well special duties of care and custody for the resources and ecosystems of the remainder. Anything that challenges or threatens to challenge the geopolitical balance embodied in UNCLOS therefore touches deeply on Canada's national interest.

Given the enormous stakes involved, however, it is by no means assured that the unique and remarkable consensus of maritime interests that occurred in the latter half of the 20th century will withstand the tremendous changes this century is likely to witness. Ocean politics will make for a global maritime commons of great strategic complexity and growing strategic competition.

Nowhere is this more apparent than in the Indo-Pacific, where ocean politics already occupy centre-stage. China—the region's most rapidly growing maritime power—acknowledged a fundamental strategic reality when it recently stated that its principal vulnerabilities and threats came from the sea. This is a remarkable shift for a state which has focused for millennia on protecting its frontiers from threats originating inland. But it's a shift that was also inevitable as China assumed a more prominent place in a global system that depends on maritime commerce and the fundamental openness of the "great commons," as Alfred T. Mahan once described them. It's the echo of a powerful geopolitical idea, expressed in the following words written in the early 16th century and now

pertinent to all states, that “[w]hoever is Lord of Malacca has his hand on the throat of Venice.”¹

What is very clear today is that the world’s oceans no longer serve to shield Canada from far-distant events. Rather, they connect us through a vast and intricate web of relationships—political, economic, financial and social—that has made us neighbours with all the world’s peoples. Our prosperity and security are thoroughly enmeshed in a global system that transcends all boundaries. It is a system that depends to varying degrees on regulated air, space and cyber commons for its functioning, but it would not function at all without a regulated ocean commons. Defending that system is not a matter of choice for Canada: it is essential to our way of life.

In fact, I would maintain that the most essential public good of this globalized era is a regulated ocean commons. By this I mean a world in which the seas are open for all to use freely and lawfully, regulated against the increasingly troubling range of illegal and criminal activities that are occurring on them, and defended against those who would threaten the pillars upon which the current global system is built.

Thus, the organizing principle for the application of Canadian seapower in this maritime century is to defend the global system both at sea and from the sea. The strategic requirement this calls for is a globally deployable sea control navy, with an operating concept of a maritime force not only held at readiness, but also forward deployed.

The responsibility to regulate the ocean commons in our own home waters must be taken by Canada alone, even if we were to develop closer arrangements with our American neighbours to defend the three ocean approaches to North America. But this task is not exclusively the preserve of the navy. It requires a comprehensive, whole of government approach in which Canada is considered a world leader.

Defending the global system may begin at home but it must also be defended abroad, and this clearly is the work of navies. Only navies can ensure the safety of waters that are likely to become increasingly contested by a range of actors. These actors may be purely criminal and opportunistic, as we’re seeing today off Somalia or the Gulf of Guinea, or they may be armed maritime groups whose political purpose and access to increasingly sophisticated weapons can be used to hold even an advanced navy at risk.

But even the largest of navies can’t be everywhere. This is why the leaders of many like-minded navies speak of the need for a maritime strategy that seeks to enlist all coastal states and maritime powers to regulate the ocean commons cooperatively, to the extent permitted by their capacities. We need to build a

FIGURE 1

The frigate HMCS *Toronto* (FFH 333) on sovereignty patrol in Frobisher Bay, off Baffin Island, 2009
Canadian Forces

meaningful capacity within the Canadian Forces, including the navy, to help build the capacity of others.

Not only must we defend the global system at sea, we must also defend the conditions that permit the global system to flourish, by being able to operate as part of a joint force “from the sea.” There’s a reason we’re seeing defence diplomacy becoming more focused on populations through the elevation of humanitarian assistance and disaster relief to core military missions. It’s not just the right thing to do, it’s in Canada’s national interest because of the crucial roles these populations play in our collective future.

This is not to say that traditional maritime diplomacy will no longer be important. In fact, it is probably more important now in this globalized era than “gunboat diplomacy” ever was. At the strategic level, forward-deployed maritime forces help to prevent and contain conflict, while also creating the conditions that can shape the success of joint forces should they ever be needed. They provide Canada with insight and influence, promote trust and confidence among our friends and give pause to our potential adversaries.

At the operational level, forward-deployed maritime forces provide options to government. They provide the capacity to respond quickly to unfolding events and a range of choices that can be carefully calibrated to the situation, including creating the time for diplomacy to work, and declaring intent without irreversible entanglement. Nothing says commitment like “boots on the ground,” whether sailors, aviators or soldiers. However, when the decision is taken to act, maritime forces provide governments the priceless advantage of choosing when and where to commit a force. The use of the sea for operational manoeuvre, as this advantage is called, can greatly amplify the employment of even a relatively small ground force, as was the case in East Timor.

Defending the global system “from the sea” doesn’t require the kind of high-end capabilities that are associated with modern amphibious warfare, which tend in the public imagination to evoke images of Normandy, Iwo Jima or Inchon. These kinds of capabilities are beyond Canada’s aspirations. What is within our national ambitions, as declared by the current government, is the capacity, in relatively permissive environments, to deliver a force ashore and to sustain it there indefinitely without reliance on shore-based infrastructure. As Haiti so recently demonstrated, there is a whole range of operations where such a capacity would permit Canada to project its power and influence to defend the global system from the sea.

The world’s littoral regions—that strip of the planet where land meets sea, extending landward or seaward as far as force and influence can be projected from either environment—will not always be as permissive as we saw in Haiti. Nonetheless, we will be drawn to these regions by our vital national interests. Over three-quarters of the world’s population lives within 200 nautical miles of a coast and over half of them within dense urban landscapes. Four out of five of the world’s capital cities are to be found in the littoral region, and virtually all of the world’s productive capacity. Moreover, these regions are where the effects of massive change along every human axis—social, demographic, cultural, technological and climatological—are increasingly being concentrated. Accordingly, there is little doubt that this is where Canada’s future joint force will operate, almost invariably as part of a large multinational operation led by our closest allies.

As a battle space, the world’s littoral regions are becoming cluttered and congested, requiring the precise delivery of a whole range of effects, from the need to win the “battle of competing narratives” at one end of a spectrum to the need to take and hold ground at the other. As we’re seeing in Afghanistan, we will usually be more constrained by international law and the values of Canadian society than the potential adversaries that Canada and its allies are likely to face. These

FIGURE 2



HMCS *Windsor* (SS 877), a *Victoria*-class submarine, with the frigate HMCS *Montréal* (FFH 336) along the Atlantic seaboard in November 2005
Canadian Forces

are adversaries who have learned to integrate the warfare traditions of Clausewitz and Mao Zedong and to organize all means of violence—criminal, irregular and conventional—to achieve their political ends. This will make for future joint operations of great ambiguity and complexity.

There are important implications in this for Canada's maritime forces, including the fundamental capacity to fight and prevail in combat at sea against a potentially far broader and more comprehensive range of threats than ever before. Our maritime forces must continue to be organized, trained and equipped to control events in contested waters. The price of admission to these high-end capabilities, including the capacity to lead multinational maritime operations, is unlikely to go down.

It is far from certain that the West will continue to enjoy its current technological and materiel advantages, and Canada is unlikely ever to enjoy the advantage of numbers. This means that we must become far more agile and adaptable as an integrated fighting force. Haiti demonstrated what we could achieve as an integrated joint team in the face of great tragedy, and this operation achieved more than a dozen exercises and months of doctrinal discussions could have achieved. But much more remains to be done.

The operation in Haiti illustrated one of our clear strengths—our people. They are the key to our future success, and so they must remain a key area of investment. This is not merely a matter of bringing the number of sailors up to the navy’s authorized strength, or of ensuring that the Canadian Forces adopt policies that make sense for a Canadian population that is evolving dramatically. This is about making sure that our people have the skills and competencies that hybrid warfare will demand, and deny to potential adversaries the advantages we now concede them in terms of their superior knowledge of local terrain—physical, social and cultural.

The government gives the Canadian Forces responsibility for defending Canada, defending North America and contributing to international peace and security. The navy has vital roles to play in all of these enduring pillars of defence policy. Defending the global system is fundamental to all three, as is the capacity to defend from the sea the conditions that permit the global system to prosper. This is our unique contribution towards Canada’s prosperity, security and national interests, and has been since the navy’s creation in 1910. This is what makes Canada’s globally deployable, sea control navy of enduring relevance in this maritime century.

NOTES

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Projection: Required Capabilities,” at the 73rd Annual General Meeting of the Conference of Defence Associations, held in Ottawa, 3 March 2010.

1. Tomé Pires, *Suma Oriental of Tome Pires: An Account of the East, from the Red Sea to China, Written in Malacca and India, 1512–1515*.