

WHY DOES CANADA NEED A NAVY?



As you'll have seen if you've read the Briefing Notes about Canada as a Maritime State and Maritime Security Threats and Challenges, there are many reasons why Canada needs a navy. Canada is a trading state and, by virtue of geography, any trade that doesn't go to our one land neighbour, must travel by the oceans. Our economic lifeblood relies on goods arriving by sea. Canada has the world's longest coastline in the world – and has oceans on three of four borders. Canada also prides itself on being a responsible international citizen and acts with other navies to ensure good order at sea – this is for self-interest as well as idealism.

But why specifically a navy? Why not let the Canadian Coast Guard take care of things? Or the police? States have navies for a number of reasons, and have had them for centuries, and in general these tasks boil down to serving as instruments of state policy. Formed in 1910 to essentially “keep the fish in and the Americans out,” Canada's navy may have unique origins but the reasons for its continued existence resonate in all states with coastlines.¹

Ken Booth, a well-known British analyst of maritime security, talked about a triad of naval responsibilities – what has become known as Booth's Triangle.² The three elements of the triangle are the diplomatic role, constabulary role and defence role. This provides a framework to understand what navies do and why we need them.

Navies don't exist for their own purposes. They exist to serve the state. They serve state policies in several ways:

- enforce national and international laws governing the use of the oceans (for example, laws relating to freedom of navigation, pollution, fishing, piracy, smuggling, trade);
- provide self-defence in home and adjacent waters (for example, monitoring/surveillance of who is using Canadian waters, deterring attack);
- assert sovereignty in waters under or claimed to be under national jurisdiction (for example, in the Arctic);
- assist civilian agencies in Canada as requested (for example, search and rescue at sea,
- serve as an instrument of foreign policy (for example to promote positive relations with potential trade partners, indicate commitment to developing countries, provide disaster relief, transport Canadians who are caught in states in conflict, participate in United Nations operations); and
- wage war (no explanation necessary!).

Navies provide the government with a very useful instrument of policy. The ships themselves are extremely flexible – the same ship can be, and often is, tasked for disaster relief, training and exercises, counter-terrorism operations and war-fighting.

The first priority of any state –including Canada – is to protect the state from harm. This is why states have armed forces. The navy’s role is to protect the country from threats coming from the sea. Navies are constantly on the lookout for threats to the maritime approaches to the country. This can be done via satellite surveillance, and certainly this is a part of it, but having naval ships on patrol is an excellent way to ascertain who is on, under, or above the water surrounding Canada. Navies are responsible to control, monitor and protect the waters off of their state’s shores. Naval capabilities are needed to make sure that national and international laws are respected in Canadian waters and to make sure Canadian waters are not used for illegal purposes.

To enhance defence of the country, Canada has entered a number of alliances, the most prominent of them being the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). In this capacity Canada is extending the reach of its concern about defence from just itself to its allies. If a war were to occur, navies would be crucial, as they were in the Second World War, to protect trade, supplies, personnel and equipment being transported through to and from the theatre of war.

Not that long ago, concern about maritime security was seen as simply facing the threats posed by the military forces of other states. Now, security is seen in a much broader context, and includes environmental concerns, the physical safety of shipping and the need to counter terrorism and transnational crime at sea.

When war/conflict or natural disaster occurs in other countries, Canada is able to respond quickly via the navy. In most cases when there is an international emergency – for example the major earthquake that happened in Haiti in 2010 – the navy is the first responder. The navy has ships kept at high readiness, so that they can be sent at very short notice to respond to conflicts and disasters.

One of the elements included in Booth’s Triangle is constabulary duties. In this case, the job involves enforcing Canadian laws in Canada’s maritime territory. The Coast Guard and the RCMP have primary duty in this regard, and the navy is used only as a supplement to them. When asked, the navy will assist the forces of law and order – a navy ship provides a level of deterrence and armament that is more likely to discourage lawbreakers at sea than a coast guard vessel (whereas some coast guards are armed, the CCG has very limited weaponry). In some cases, the ability to use force to deter or to compel law-breakers at sea is a means of last resort. As Peter Haydon, a Canadian analyst of defence policy, writes “On its own, a non-military coast guard cannot provide the necessary guarantee of compliance, and certainly would not be able to manage violence should the need arise – this is a naval task.”³

Outside of Canada’s territorial waters and in international waters, the navy is a prime agent for helping to assure order. For example, with allies, Canada’s navy participated in operations off the coast of Somalia to address the piracy that was happening there and to protect international shipping. It continues to participate in operations in the Mediterranean to prevent movement of weapons and terrorists on the oceans.

The navy also assists civil powers in search and rescue. If a ship or an aircraft goes down over water, the navy provides valuable assets in the search. For example, when Swiss Air 111 went down off Nova Scotia in 1998, the navy provided assistance in the search for survivors, and then

the search for and recovery of the wreckage. The navy is also extremely useful to coordinate such activities, given that navy ships have excellent command and control capabilities, and sophisticated communication equipment. Moreover, the navy tends to be the only organization capable of coordinating complex and multi-agency security operations at sea.

Navies are one of the best ways for governments to increase the visibility of Canada and indicate interest and commitment in other states. International law recognizes a warship as the extension of a state – in law, it is part of the state even while traveling abroad. This brings us to the role of naval diplomacy. Sending a warship to visit a foreign port provides an excellent illustration of interest – not necessarily enmity or coercion, but of friendship and common interests. The Canadian navy visits ports every year, and these visits usually involve meeting with dignitaries, tours of the ship and interacting via sports or cultural events with the local people. In 2018, Canadian ships visited ports in Asia, Australia and Europe – and for the first time in many years, a Canadian submarine (HMCS *Chicoutimi*) visited Japan. These visits cement ties with long-time friends and help make new friends.

The great thing about navies is that they can send signals of their home state’s intent, whether friendly or not, without infringing on the sovereign territory of another state. A ship can “remain outside another state’s territory but within its perception, unlike an army force for example, which by its nature must be on some state’s territory.”⁴ A naval ship provides a visible symbol of commitment, but without infringing on someone’s territory.

International activity is more than just making friends and advancing government policy objectives like trade or human rights. If there is a war, then it is helpful for navies to have had experience working together. It is extremely rare that Canada and the Canadian navy act alone internationally, and this is why Canada works so closely with allies. The Canadian Navy participates in numerous exercises and operations with other navies. This not only creates good operational practices, Canadian personnel get to know the personnel of other countries who can be valuable contacts in the future if there is conflict.

Canada’s navy is not a big one, but it is asked to do big things. It is responsible for a huge area in the waters around the country. At home, it acts as a deterrent to foreign forces and assists the civil agencies at the government’s request. It has become increasingly active in the Arctic – and will become even more active once the Arctic Offshore Patrol Ships join the fleet. Outside Canada, it serves Canadian foreign policy, and it acts to protect good order at sea and help out when disaster strikes. In addition, the navy has provided a symbol of Canadian commitment to international operations sanctioned by the United Nations, and other crisis management operations.

As the definition of security broadens to new challenges and new responsibilities, the Canadian Navy continues to provide flexibility to support national maritime security as well as to be an instrument of foreign policy and a symbol of Canada abroad. It is also, a symbol of Canada’s statehood. To quote Peter Haydon, “Not maintaining an effective naval force is tantamount to surrendering one’s sovereignty at sea. An effective navy is prerequisite of statehood; a country with an ocean but without a navy cannot claim to be truly sovereign.”⁵

Notes

1. As noted in Peter Haydon, “Why Does Canada Still Need a Navy?” *Canadian Naval Review*, Vol. 3, No. 2 (2007).
2. See Ken Booth, *Law, Force and Diplomacy at Sea* (Winchester, MA: Allen & Unwin, 1985).
3. Haydon, “Why Does Canada Still Need a Navy?”
4. *Ibid.*
5. *Ibid.*