



CANADIAN GLOBAL AFFAIRS INSTITUTE
INSTITUT CANADIEN DES AFFAIRES MONDIALES

More Than Just Showing the Flag: The Case for Amphibious Ships

by Andrea Lane and Jeffrey F. Collins
December, 2016

POLICY UPDATE

MORE THAN JUST SHOWING THE FLAG: THE CASE FOR AMPHIBIOUS SHIPS

Andrea Lane, Deputy Director
Jeffrey F. Collins, Research Fellow
Centre for the Study of Security and Development

December, 2016



CANADIAN GLOBAL AFFAIRS INSTITUTE
INSTITUT CANADIEN DES AFFAIRES MONDIALES

Prepared for the Canadian Global Affairs Institute
1600, 530 – 8th Avenue S.W., Calgary, AB T2P 3S8
www.cgai.ca

©2016 Canadian Global Affairs Institute
ISBN: 978-1-988493-13-8



Under Justin Trudeau, Canadian foreign policy seems to be marking a return to peace support missions and increased multilateral engagement. As such, it can be expected that the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) will find itself deployed abroad in significant numbers in the medium-term. This participation in international military efforts will require a continued investment in personnel, equipment, and budget resources, making the efficient and cost-effective design of Canadian military contributions more important than ever. Nowhere is this need for efficiency more acute than with Canada's navy.

Right now, the Royal Canadian Navy (RCN) is undergoing the largest ship replacement program in a generation. However, the National Shipbuilding Strategy (NSS) framework enshrines the RCN's Cold War-era approach to fleet composition, with its emphasis on 'blue-water' operations on the high seas. Under the Navy's direction, the NSS provides a one-for-one replacement of existing capabilities, centered on 15 Canadian surface combatant (CSC) ships designed for operating in the North Atlantic. This traditional, generalist approach to fleet composition excludes an effective Canadian response to the post-9/11 demand for naval capabilities that can assist operations on land and in the littoral, that is, near shorelines. In light of this capability gap, Canadian decision-makers should seriously consider acquiring amphibious ships in the near future.

Amphibious capabilities--the ability to transport and launch troops and vehicles via ship, as well as the launching of ground-targeted weapons from the sea--are flexible, specialized military assets that are highly valued by Canada's allies, and by the international organizations to which we belong. Amphibious operations have been the focus of recent annual NATO exercises in the Baltic Sea region, assumed by many analysts to be the locus for any potential conflict with Russia. Along with submarine (and anti-submarine) operations, another area of international cooperation in which Canada's capabilities are limited, amphibious assets are likely to be in great demand on all three oceans in the uncertain future security environment.

Beyond the warfighting utility of amphibious ships, such vessels would provide the RCN with the ability to perform a peacetime helping role for which the Canadian public has an [expressed](#) appetite. When humanitarian crises such as typhoons, earthquakes, or hurricanes strike at home or overseas, one of the most prominent responses the Government of Canada can deploy are the ships, aircraft, and naval personnel of the RCN. Ships and their crew provide self-sustaining, self-contained humanitarian assistance, as sailors can live aboard and be fed from their ship's galleys, without straining local resources. Just this past month, the frigate HMCS *Vancouver* assisted with the earthquake in New Zealand. Already in the area, the ship's crew and Sea King helicopter [responded](#) within 24 hours of the call for help. Onsite, they aided in the evacuation of residents and tourists, repaired sewer lines, and provided supplies to stranded New Zealanders.

Despite the media attention and goodwill generated by the *Vancouver's* deployment the RCN's fleet remains ill-equipped to go beyond short-term, token contributions. For example, the *Vancouver* was carrying only basic humanitarian assistance supplies, such as chainsaws, tents, bedding, and generators, and spent only a few days in the area. By contrast, New Zealand's HMNZS Canterbury, which also responded, carries landing craft (themselves capable of embarking vehicles) that can land on beaches or tie-up to damaged dock facilities. Complementing these features are two helicopters, a 5-bed hospital, a morgue, and galley facilities equipped to feed up to 1000 people, as happened during the 2011 Christchurch earthquake. Likewise, Australia's naval humanitarian response is centered on their helicopter



platform *Canberra*-class, dual-purpose ships which can carry four landing craft, 100 vehicles, six to 10 helicopters and over 1000 troops. In early 2016, *Canberra* responded to a typhoon in Fiji with 60 tonnes of humanitarian supplies, and a complement of several hundred engineers, carpenters, electricians, and plumbers, all of whom were able to access even the most remote areas in the Fijian archipelago using the ships helicopters and landing craft.

While the RCN's official policy guidance, *Leadmark 2050*, does address the idea of an eventual dual-purpose amphibious ship for Canada, previous attempts to procure such a capability for the military encountered staunch opposition from naval officials who view amphibious ships as coming at the expense of surface combatants. Under the Harper Conservatives, there was extensive discussion of an amphibious task force within the CAF, to have at its centre a "Big Honkin' Ship," in then-Chief of Defence Staff Rick Hillier's parlance. The concept was abandoned in 2011 due to budget constraints, with the RCN unwilling to endanger the NSS plans for 15 CSC and 2 Joint Support Ships.

With the Trudeau government's eyes fixed firmly on international cooperation and effective, "Canadian value-added," military contributions, the RCN should seriously reconsider its procurement priorities. The Navy's insistence on its traditional tasking and fleet mix makes its out of step with both whole-of-government priorities, and the wishes of the Canadian public. As it stands today, it is doubtful that the original plan, to purchase 15 surface combatants within the planned budget of \$27 billion, will come to [fruition](#). Canada does need to replace its 12 *Halifax*-class frigates at some point by the 2030s; however, in light of fiscal concerns, it would be more prudent for Ottawa to revamp the NSS program with a purchase of 10-12 surface combatants and 2 amphibious ships.

As it happens, Canada may be acquiring some low-level amphibious capabilities by accident, in its planned leasing of at least one interim AOR, the *Asterix* commercial ship conversion underway at Davie shipyards. Rival shipyard Irving has been touting its own commercial repurposing, which, like Davie's offering, has its humanitarian credentials front and centre in the promotional material. While these sort of ships can be acquired cheaply and quickly, and provide some needed power, they are a halfway measure between the traditional fuel replenishment ship and multi-role amphibious platform. Hopefully, the RCN will learn from the experiences of its southern hemisphere allies and recognize the utility of dedicated, multi-role amphibious ships and the innovative missions they could enable amid a changing geostrategic environment.

► **About the Authors**

Andrea Lane is the Deputy Director of the Centre for the Study of Security and Development and a PhD Political Science candidate at Dalhousie University. Jeffrey F. Collins is a Research Fellow at the Centre for the Study of Security and Development and a PhD Political Science candidate at Carleton University.

► **Canadian Global Affairs Institute**

The Canadian Global Affairs Institute focuses on the entire range of Canada's international relations in all its forms including (in partnership with the University of Calgary's School of Public Policy), trade investment and international capacity building. Successor to the Canadian Defence and Foreign Affairs Institute (CDFAI, which was established in 2001), the Institute works to inform Canadians about the importance of having a respected and influential voice in those parts of the globe where Canada has significant interests due to trade and investment, origins of Canada's population, geographic security (and especially security of North America in conjunction with the United States), social development, or the peace and freedom of allied nations. The Institute aims to demonstrate to Canadians the importance of comprehensive foreign, defence and trade policies which both express our values and represent our interests.

The Institute was created to bridge the gap between what Canadians need to know about Canadian international activities and what they do know. Historically Canadians have tended to look abroad out of a search for markets because Canada depends heavily on foreign trade. In the modern post-Cold War world, however, global security and stability have become the bedrocks of global commerce and the free movement of people, goods and ideas across international boundaries. Canada has striven to open the world since the 1930s and was a driving factor behind the adoption of the main structures which underpin globalization such as the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, the World Trade Organization and emerging free trade networks connecting dozens of international economies. The Canadian Global Affairs Institute recognizes Canada's contribution to a globalized world and aims to inform Canadians about Canada's role in that process and the connection between globalization and security.

In all its activities the Institute is a charitable, non-partisan, non-advocacy organization that provides a platform for a variety of viewpoints. It is supported financially by the contributions of individuals, foundations, and corporations. Conclusions or opinions expressed in Institute publications and programs are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of Institute staff, fellows, directors, advisors or any individuals or organizations that provide financial support to the Institute.