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by Adam Lajeunesse
June 2018

POLICY UPDATE

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When the Canadian government released [Strong, Secure, Engaged \(SSE\)](#) in June 2017, Arctic security was highlighted as an emerging challenge for the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF). Described as an “international crossroads where issues of climate change, international trade, and global security meet”, *SSE* assumes the melting of the Arctic sea ice will lead to a more accessible North and, in turn, a more complex and pressing security environment as “state and commercial actors from around the world” erode the isolation that Canada has long assumed to be the Arctic norm.

In response, *SSE* offered a list of initiatives designed to increase Canada’s northern situational awareness, communication, and command and control capacities – long-standing Achilles heels for CAF operations in the region. This focus was not fundamentally new, however, nor was the largest investment being made in regional security: the construction of five (and maybe six) Arctic and offshore patrol ships (AOPS). The first of these ships, HMCS Harry DeWolf, is nearing completion in Halifax and is set to be launched this summer.

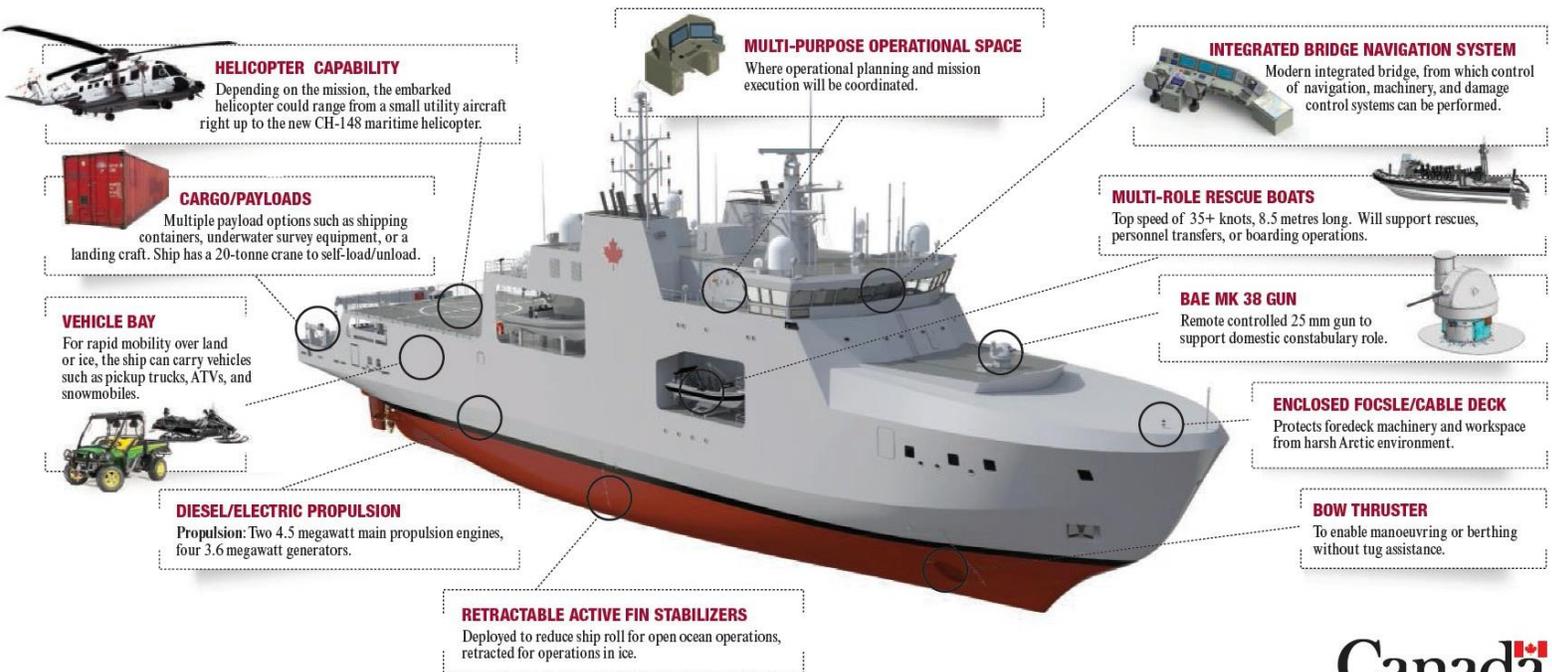
Considerable (and often justifiable) criticism has been levelled at the long delays in ship construction and the program’s [high price](#) tag. Building locally has added to the cost and political inertia has [inflated the sticker price](#). Yet, the most important debate has been over the concept of the program itself: what are these ships for, what are they meant to achieve, and is that operational concept even appropriate?

Criticism of the AOPS capabilities and design arose early in the development process, with DND Deputy Minister Robert Fonberg famously [referring to them as “Frankenboats”](#) made from a compromise design which limited their utility as either Arctic or patrol craft. A [2009 NDP criticism](#) of their icebreaking capability left the enduring term “slush-breakers” and this criticism was crystallized in 2013 by an oft-cited policy paper authored by Michael Byers and Stewart Webb, entitled [Titanic Blunder](#). In it, the authors noted that the ships were too slow for open ocean patrol, too unstable, too lightly armed and too limited in range and icebreaking power. These criticisms are normally noted in [academic/expert analysis](#) and often embraced by journalists in opinion pieces and [newspaper stories](#). Recently, defence commentator [Robert Smol](#) reignited a debate, begun years ago by political scientist [Rob Huebert](#), surrounding the vessels’ limited armaments. What good, they argue, is a warship that can’t go to war?

While most of these criticisms are based on legitimate concerns, they all seem to miss the forest for the trees, misunderstanding the intent of the ships and how they fit into Canada’s evolving Arctic security situation. Defining a role for the AOPS, *SSE* states that the vessels will “provide armed, sea-borne surveillance of Canadian waters, including in the Arctic. They will enforce sovereignty, cooperating with partners, at home and abroad, and will provide the Government of Canada with awareness of activities in Canada’s waters.” To put specific missions to this broad objective, the Navy’s 2015 “Concept of Use” lists the following tasks: search and rescue, support for other government departments (OGD); maritime domain awareness; assistance to law



enforcement; aid to civil power; logistical support to the CAF and OGD; and sovereignty protection.



Royal Canadian Navy
Public Affairs – January 2015
www.forces.gc.ca



Figure 1: A diagram outlining the various capabilities onboard Canada's new Harry DeWolf-class Arctic and Offshore Patrol Ship (AOPS). (Source: Department of National Defence)

Despite their flying the naval ensign, the AOPS are not intended to be warships. That is not a mistake, it was a careful decision stemming from several years of government and CAF [assessment of threats and requirements](#). The security threat to the Canadian Arctic is unconventional, and will likely remain so, centred on monitoring, policing, and assisting civilian and commercial activity. These are the low-risk, high-probability security threats projected to emerge as a result of the increased use and development of the Arctic. [Comparisons](#) to more heavily armed Scandinavian equivalents, such as the Norwegian *Svalbard* or Danish *Knud Rasmussen* class, miss the point. Both Norway and Denmark will have a real need for ice-strengthened warships in the event of a conflict with Russia in the Baltic, Barents or Norwegian seas. There is simply no realistic possibility of the RCN engaging in high-intensity kinetic operations in the Canadian Arctic or surrounding areas.

Nor are the AOPS icebreakers. Their limited ice-strengthening (Polar Class 5) will not allow them to enter parts of the High Arctic, or to operate in the Northwest Passage during the winter months. Designed primarily to monitor, assist and police activity in the region, these ships really only need to be able to operate in the North when other ships are there, too. If ice conditions are too dangerous for the AOPS, it stands to reason that the same ice will close off the Canadian Arctic to most other activity as well. In 2015 [Tim Choi](#) addressed many of the more technical complaints surrounding ship speed, helicopter support capability and fuel capacity. Its armaments and speed



are limited but suited to the kinds of constabulary duties it is likely to support, while its range is sufficient when paired with new facilities at Nanisivik.

[Rear-Admiral David Gardam](#), then commander of Maritime Forces Atlantic, best described what the AOPS offer. According to Gardam, they are a “a big empty ship” that can “embark doctors, dentists, scientists, marine biologists, police and fisheries officers, environmentalists and many other personnel with an interest in, or a mandate for, the development and sustainment of Canada’s north.” They are versatile, general-purpose vessels which should be able to contribute to Arctic security across the spectrum at a lower price than icebreakers at the times of the year when shipping and other activity in the Northwest Passage really demand a presence.

Because threats to the Canadian Arctic will likely fall in the safety and security categories, rather than defence, the RCN will never play a leading role in Arctic security. Rather, it will have to support other government departments and agencies in fulfilling their northern mandates. This is what the AOPS will be doing with their time. They will be assisting in hydrographic surveying with the Canadian Hydrographic Service, fisheries patrols with the Department of Fisheries and Oceans, and constabulary operations with the RCMP. In such cases, the RCN will enable others rather than engage in typical naval operations, a less glamorous role than that which frigates and submarines normally play but an equally important one.

No discussion of the AOPS is complete without reference to the defence of sovereignty. That term is frequently used in government publications on the subject, and sovereignty protection is listed as a key operational task in the Navy’s Concept of Operation for the DeWolf class. While a patrol ship (or several) will not directly affect the Northwest Passage’s legal status, or convince the United States to recognize Canada’s long-standing position that these are internal waters, the presence and control that they represent are essential.

The AOPS were designed to provide that measure of control, manifested in the increased awareness and response and support capability which they will provide. It is not the physical act of being there which is so important – they are not intended as floating flagpoles. Rather, it is the ability to support and police activity as it increases in the region and to support OGD as they invariably see their responsibilities expand. The [Statement on Canada’s Arctic Foreign Policy](#) (2009) explains that “Canada exercises its sovereignty daily through good governance and responsible stewardship. It does so through the broad range of actions it undertakes as a government ... We exercise our sovereignty in the Arctic through our laws and regulations, as we do throughout Canada.” That policy statement, while slightly dated, is not going to change under a Liberal government and the AOPS will be an important tool in enforcing those laws and regulations and enabling that good governance and responsible stewardship.¹

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► About the Author

Adam Lajeunesse, PhD, is the Irving Shipbuilding Chair in Canadian Arctic Marine Security Policy and an assistant professor at the Mulroney Institute of Government, St. Francis Xavier University. He is the author of *Lock, Stock, and Icebergs* (2016), an award-winning political history of the Northwest Passage, co-author of the 2017 monograph “China’s Arctic Ambitions and What They Mean for Canada” and co-editor of *Canadian Arctic Operations, 1941-2015: Lessons Learned, Lost, and Relearned* (2017). Lajeunesse is a specialist in Arctic sovereignty and security policy and has written extensively on CAF Arctic operations, maritime security, Canadian-American co-operation in the North, and Canadian Arctic history. Dr. Lajeunesse is a fellow of the Canadian Global Affairs Institute, the Arctic Institute of North America and the Centre for the Study of Security and Development, and sits on the editorial board of the *Canadian Naval Review*.

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