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Why Canada Should not purchase the
Mistral-Class Ships, for now**

by Keshav Kelkar and Grégoire-François Legault
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POLICY PAPER

Putting the Cart before the Horse: Why Canada should not purchase the *Mistral*-Class Ships, for now

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Oceans matter more to Canada's prosperity and security than ever before. The Royal Canadian Navy has arrived at a moment of unprecedented strategic opportunity.

- Retired Vice-Admiral Paul Maddison

Retired Vice-Admiral Maddison's wise words come at a time when the Royal Canadian Navy (RCN) sorely needs to replace its aging vessels so that it can continue to advance Canada's national interests and meet its international commitments. The calls for renewal come at a time when the Navy is facing a plethora of problems that not only jeopardize the lives of Canadian sailors, but also hinder the Navy's ability to accomplish its core missions. Earlier this year, HMCS *Protecteur*, one of two of Canada's supply ships, suffered extensive damage as a fire broke out on board. The *Protecteur*-class auxiliary oil [replenishment](#) (AOR) ships re-supply task groups at sea with food, munitions, fuel, spare parts and other supplies. In fact, the Navy [just quietly announced](#) that it is decommissioning four ships, including all of Canada's supply ships, downgrading the RCN from a "Rank Three Navy" to a "[Rank Six Navy](#)" according to its own classification system. This places Canada far behind other navies, such as Australia and the Netherlands.

The loss of these ships has serious consequences for the Royal Canadian Navy. Without AORs, the rest of the Pacific fleet is unable to be refuelled and resupplied while on extended operations. To add to the growing list of problems, Murray Brewster points out that "bids to [replace](#) the navy's two existing replenishment ships have been long and fraught with complications." The decision to decommission the supply ships comes well before the new joint support ships are ready. Not having these ships will prevent the Navy from carrying out blue water operations unless it receives direct support from its allies.

These problems come at a time when Canada's reliance on the Navy is more crucial than ever before. Revitalizing the federal fleet is [crucial](#) to safeguard Canada's economic prosperity through the protection of sea lanes, as well as upholding international law. As Canada pursues an economic strategy that sees its resources exported to the Asia Pacific region, it is vital that the RCN be able to secure sea lanes in conjunction with its allies, and if necessary, project naval power to defend Canadian interests. As retired Rear-Admiral Roger Girouard notes, "Canada should not expect to make windfall profits from the positive outcomes of Asian markets if it is completely unwilling to [invest in the security](#) and stability that creates the positive environment for these very markets to flourish." Meanwhile, other conflicts, including fighting in eastern Ukraine, have the Navy's attention. HMCS *Regina* is now patrolling the Mediterranean as part of NATO's reassurance mission in the region. As well, the lingering threat of climate change has the potential to turn Canada's Arctic waters into a shipping superhighway, raising concerns about the Navy's ability to provide support to Canadian Coast Guard (CCG).

To address these challenges, the federal government has released two documents that promise a better future for the RCN. First is the Canada First Defense Strategy, which recognizes the aforementioned problems, provides a detailed roadmap for the modernization of the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF), and vows to produce a first-class, modern military that is well trained, well equipped and ready to take on the challenges of the 21st century. Second, in 2011, the



government announced its National Shipbuilding Procurement Strategy (NSPS), which outlines the government's plans to procure new combat and non-combat vessels. Under the multi-billion dollar NSPS, Canada will build six to eight offshore patrol ships for the Arctic and 15 surface combat ships over the next 20 years in designated national shipyards.

These documents reaffirm the government's commitment to refit and revitalize the CAF. However, the reality for the Navy is different. As Former Vice-Admiral Maddison points out, "the Canada First Defence Strategy, a [Conservative vision](#) conceived in 2008, is outdated, and he insists that Canada's national interests are "increasingly challenged in the maritime domain." Maddison further adds that, "No longer should the dusty deserts of landlocked Kandahar, where Canadian military priorities lay for more than a decade of brutal fighting, rule the day. Countries on the Pacific Rim are shifting resources to the water and building bigger navies."

With regard to the NSPS, observers are already sceptical based on the government's dismal track record for the procurement of military assets, citing a depressing list of delays and failures. A noteworthy example is the replacement of the aging Sea King helicopters with a new fleet of Sikorsky naval helicopters. The program has been plagued by cancellations, delays, lawsuits, penalties, and is emblematic of Ottawa's poor track record when it comes to procuring vital military assets. Understandably, observers have serious doubts about the current government's ability to deliver the ships on time and at a reasonable price tag.

While the RCN waits for new ships during this critical transition period, Christopher Cowan from the NATO Council of Canada [has suggested](#) that this is an opportune moment for the Navy to acquire France's *Mistral*-class Amphibious Assault Ships. He argues that this would not only block Russia from purchasing them, but also revigorate the Navy and bolster the NATO alliance. Before assessing the viability of such a policy option, it is important to provide an overview of these ships and their capabilities.

THE *MISTRAL*-CLASS SHIPS IN A NUTSHELL

The *Mistral*-class warships are power projection and command vessels. These amphibious landing ships are in effect helicopter carriers designed for a wide range of operations, from conducting raids onshore to providing relief aid and medical assistance in disaster-stricken zones. The 200 meter long *Mistral* boasts a 69,000 square foot flat top deck that features landing pads for six helicopters, and the ship's hangers are big enough to accommodate a total number of 16 medium helicopters that can be lifted on the main deck via elevators. In addition, the *Mistral*-class can house up to 60 armoured vehicles (or 13 main battle tanks), and can provide living quarters for 450 troops in ideal conditions. These ships also carry a medical facility equipped with 69 beds and a specialized surgery center. Depending on the mission requirements, the *Mistral*-class ships can also incorporate additional modular facilities such as a field hospital.

At a price tag of roughly 600 million euros, those ships are a relative bargain. Given the variety of tasks assigned to the RCN in recent years, Canada clearly requires flexible, and affordable, assets capable of performing a wide variety of traditional and non-traditional security missions. The Navy had initially planned to acquire one or two amphibious assault ships in the late 2000s, and even considered acquiring *Mistral*-class ships, but this plan has since been cancelled.



We contend that while the *Mistral*-class could indeed fill a certain gap in the RCN's capabilities, given current naval doctrine, the lack of supporting military hardware, and Canada's naval mission history, the Navy would currently have a hard time integrating the ships into its existing fleet structure.

Canadian naval doctrine has matured over the years, and reflects the operational doctrines of other NATO navies and the RCN's close links with the US Navy. The doctrine's core focus is interoperability and joint operations with allied forces. As such, the RCN's central role is to generate and maintain a combat-capable maritime force that is able to defend Canada, conduct surveillance, patrol Canada's territory under its jurisdiction, maintain the capability to respond to maritime incidents and support civil authorities during emergencies. International missions include, but are not limited to, taking part in reassurance missions, or recent anti-piracy operations. Under current mission requirements, Canadian ships often integrate themselves into larger allied fleets, often led by the United States. Canada's current naval doctrine does not include provisions for amphibious warfare, or heavy power projection.

Furthermore, the RCN does not have the necessary hardware to get full value from the *Mistral*-class ships. First, despite a [proposal](#) in the mid-2000s to create a Canadian equivalent of the American Marines, the RCN still does not have marines trained to conduct amphibious operations. Second, the absence of vital air assets—helicopters and vertical take-off and landing (VTOL) aircraft—prevent the navy from utilizing the ship to its fullest. Lastly, the *Mistral's* role as a projection and command platform makes it an ideal target for enemy ships and submarines, rendering it [vulnerable](#) unless it is deployed with escort and supply ships, vessels that Canada cannot yet commit. For now, the RCN needs to put its house in order and prioritize replacing its supply ships as soon as possible.

And lastly, Canada has always been a coalition player in naval operations abroad, letting the bigger and better equipped navies do the heavy lifting while playing a key supporting role. The RCN seldom takes part in overseas operations without the support of its allies, and participating in [anti-piracy and counterterrorist operations](#) does not specifically require procuring an amphibious assault ship. Still, the proposal is worth exploring as a long-term option for the Navy in what promises to be a turbulent 21st century.

France, understandably, refuses to take a huge economic hit, along with the potential lawsuits that could come from cancelling the contract with Russia, especially when [Canada](#), Germany and Great Britain are not doing the same. France's recent move to [halt](#) the *Mistral* transfer to Russia is welcomed, but NATO members should still consider purchasing the two ships commissioned by Russia. Arguably, the United States could most easily [integrate](#) the war vessels into its fleet, but NATO as a whole could alternatively operate the ship with a joint crew. This proposal would help solve the military alliance's biggest problems: [cohesiveness and sharing of responsibilities](#). Still, the NSPS mandates that the ships be built in Canadian shipyards in order to create local jobs and kickstart the faltering Canadian shipbuilding industry, which is a good move [to win voters' support](#) in key constituencies, but a terrible policy decision from a fiscally conservative perspective and for Canadian taxpayers. Under different circumstances, that is if the RCN had its house in order and updated its doctrine based on new mission requirements, the *Mistral*-class ships could provide the RCN with an opportunity to create a carrier battle group *lite*.

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