

# Navy Needs Both AORs and Amphibious Craft

The decision to exclude the once feted “Big Honking” amphibious ship from its Canada First Defence Strategy (CFDS), like the **padded requirements** for the navy’s long awaited Joint Support Ship (JSS) smacks of self deception. This aberrant mind set typically consists of assessing a situation in terms of preconceived fixed notions while ignoring or rejecting any contrary signs. Most significantly, it is also seen as a refusal to benefit from experience.

This scenario significantly impacts the navy’s case supporting its urgent requirement to replace its aging Auxiliary Oiler Replenishment (AOR) ships, risking curtailment of future missions involving protracted and long-range fleet deployments pursuant to Parliament’s wishes.

Clearly, a forward maritime defence strategy, underpinned by joint sea, land and air expeditionary forces, is the optimal solution for Canada in such uneasy times. Such a strategy cannot be accomplished without a judicious mix of modern fleet replenishment craft and purpose-built amphibious ships.

Fleet replenishment vessels, such as the AOR and JSS, and amphibious ships serve different purposes with interrelated and complementary functions. The amphibious ship is the front-line combatant: quickly disembarking land forces and their weaponry using connector systems such as landing craft and helicopters. Conversely, AOR/JSS provide fuel, supplies, food and ammunition to support the amphibious ship and the Naval Task Group’s escorting ships. It debarks stores and personnel systematically and more slowly using lifting devices, Roll-On Roll-Off (RO-RO), and Lift-On Lift-Off (LO-LO) facilities.

*Australia’s future Canberra Class amphibious ships.*



Recently, the *Globe and Mail* reported that the Conservative government has revised its expectations of success in Kandahar. Knowing that the situation on the ground in Regional Command South is ever-changing and our military commitment there is slated to **end** in 2011, such a policy shift may indeed prove to be a politically sound. What does not seem to tally, however, is the absence, in the CFDS, of any provision for the **Canadian Expeditionary Force** Command (CEFCOM) that would enable it to fully discharge its intended role through the acquisition of a capability to field a Standing Contingency Task Force (SCTF).

This omission is puzzling, considering **that** under Mr. Harper’s leadership, defence policy had recognized the need for strategic air and sea mobility of rapid reaction forces by employing heavy airlift and amphibious ships. The recent purchase of C-17 Globemaster III aircraft adequately addresses the former but the latter requirement remains

unsatisfied. If correct, the diminution of CEFCOM’s mission capability that arises from the abandonment of prior government intentions to field a SCTF with an amphibious capability is a most worrisome turn of events given that, in 2005, the aim of the government of the day was to step-up our military’s ability to deploy forces to trouble spots around the world through the generation of such a force.

Without an amphibious ship to get a land force ashore quickly in support of security and humanitarian missions, and for the ongoing delivery of their combat and logistic support, CEFCOM will remain a hollow command that is unable to field the government’s envisaged rapid response and contingency task force. In the November 2005 edition of the *Maple Leaf*, Navy Captain Peter Ellis, Director of Maritime Requirements (Sea), explained it this way: “This amphibious ship is really designed to project the Land Forces from sea to shore ...to get that critical mass of people and their equipment to shore in relatively short order, to be able to carry on with their operations immediately.”

Carrying on in the same vein, Honourary Navy Captain, Senator Hugh Segal, in a speech delivered at the April 29, 2008 Navy Summit, boldly advocated the addition of an entirely new and global maritime capability. **“Broad reach amphibian capacity is no longer a ‘wouldn’t it be nice’ option,”** he said. “We need to be able to have it in more than one theatre at a time.”

Later, the esteemed military historian, Dr. Jack Granatstein expanded upon Senator Segal’s suggestion. “Our sailors must be able to transport and support Canadian



troops operating overseas, sometimes perhaps on a hostile shore. The presently planned three Joint Support Ships can't do this; four might be able to manage, but six would be better, along with what General Rick Hillier called 'a big honking ship' that could transport four to six helicopters and a battalion-sized expeditionary force. Such ships can also do humanitarian work... that we can scarcely tackle today," said Granatstein. And he was right.

Similar points of view addressing the need for a Canadian amphibious capability, were also recently expressed in the Conference of Defence Associations Institute's 2008 Vimy Paper by a former commander of our Pacific Fleet, Rear Admiral (ret) Roger Girouard and RAdm (ret) Ken Summers, the former Commander CF Middle East during the 1990 Gulf War. These insightful assessments reinforce the fundamental need, and critical lack, in Canada's capability to deploy and support our forces in the world's littorals from their bases in Canada.

Implicit in past government's vision for a SCTF is a requirement to acquire an amphibious ship specifically designed for the embarkation and transportation of a militarily-credible battle group, its vehicles, weaponry other paraphernalia, and the enabling sea and air connectors. With no requirement for a sitting Prime Minister to secure prior air space or port clearances, the SCTF's amphibious ship would afford political decision makers and military commanders unparalleled flexibility and allow them the currently unavailable option of pre-positioning (in international waters) in the vicinity of a gathering security crisis.

This joint seaborne quick reaction force was to have had an initial operating capability by 2007, but unforeseen budgetary and operational pressures arising largely from our mission in Afghanistan obliged the government to direct the former CDS to suspend further development until after the 2010 Vancouver Olympics.

At this time, according to the International Institute For Strategic Studies' publication, *The Military Balance 2008*, Canada's navy comprises a total of 47 ships: four submarines, three destroyers, 12 frigates, 12 patrol and coastal combatants, two logistics ships (AOR), and 14 support vessels. Initial plans called for the commissioning of three JSS to replace the existing two AORs. The addition, by 2010, of two more training vessels and up to eight Arctic Patrol Vessels, and starting in 2015, the con-

struction of 15 ships to replace Canada's old Tribal Class destroyers and its Halifax Class frigates, could ultimately see the fleet grow to some 58 ships.

Significantly, though, nowhere in the CFDS is there even a hint of plans for the future construction of amphibious ships; even though such a ship would be required to allow CEFCOM to develop the previously envisaged SCTF capability.

Numerical objectives and force capability requirements assume meaning only in the context of rigorous political and military assessments and approved programme goals, they do not validate the worth or relevance of a given strategy. They beg two larger issues: what political, economic, and security interests are Canadian naval forces intended to serve? And what is to be the navy's distinctive contribution to Canada's national security in this new century? It was thought that part of the answer would lie with a future SCTF and its fully developed amphibious capability.

Acknowledging that the Harper government is fully aware that in addition to its responsibility to adequately provide for the defence of our north, carrying on with the transformation of our forces, and successfully pursuing to its successful conclusion Canada's current mission in Afghani-

stan, it must also be fully cognizant of its obligation to prepare our nation and its armed forces to respond to the rapidly evolving geostrategic revolution that is underway. In short, government planners must **acknowledge the inevitability of other wars** after the Afghan mission winds down, and Canada must stand ready to continue **to share the West's security burden.**

This revolutionary change is rapidly shifting the focus of planners in both Canada and the United States from Europe and the Atlantic Ocean to the vast reaches of the Pacific Ocean and peoples of the teeming nations of the Asia-Pacific littoral. This is where Canada's future prosperity lies. This is where Canada's future major security challenges will arise. This is where Canada's future battles will most likely be waged. This where Canada's body politic today must become engaged. And this is the region of the world where Canada's military must be fully prepared to fight in the defence of Canada's national interests.

Realizing the importance of the burgeoning two-way flows of people, commerce and natural resources between Canada and the nations of the Asia-Pacific Region, implies that Canada must turn its national face westward and significantly increase its lilliputian diplomatic, intelli-

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gence, and military footprint. To properly defend and advance Canada's interests in this vast area will require the use of all of its available instruments of national power. Soft power government initiatives underpinned by a rapidly deployable SCTF would constitute this nations' security bulwark and help assure continued security and prosperity.

To adequately secure Canada's interests, maritime hard power elements must also comprise a militarily-credible surface and sub surface fleet, as well as fleet replenishment vessels and an amphibious ship. For maximum efficiency and effectiveness this force should be fully interoperable with the armed forces of our closest allies: USA and Australia; the former possessing the world's most powerful navy and amphibious forces, the latter now swiftly moving to acquire its own modern amphibious capability through the acquisition of a new class of highly capable, minimally crewed and cost efficient amphibious warships.

However, the sad reality of the current uncertain future of the JSS programme and the SCTF may well be that, in addition to government hesitancy, the visionary efforts made under the former CDS to implant "jointness" within the CF may be giving

way to much of the same myopic, parochial and service-centric approaches to the nation's defence strategy that have so often failed Canada in the past. In this context, our navy's long and continuing lack of purpose built expeditionary amphibious ships to deliver and support security and humanitarian forces at effective and viable levels is seen to represent a critical deficiency in military capability.

It may also be that some politically compliant and newly-minted admirals and generals may be reluctant to face the stark reality that the planned JSS will have very limited usefulness in supporting even small unopposed landings. Contrast this with the amphibious capability that was so effectively demonstrated in 1956 during Operation Rapid Step by Canada's aircraft carrier, HMCS *Magnificent*, when it was quickly reconfigured for troop lift and speedily despatched by Prime Minister Pearson in response to the United Nations' request to send a peace keeping force to Egypt. Sadly, such a national capability, was destroyed long ago with the scrapping of our last carrier, HMCS *Bonaventure*, in 1970. Since then, we have seen the consequence of leasing civilian cargo ships, the GTS *Katie* incident, and the gallant effort by ships of Atlantic

Command to deliver aid to New Orleans in the wake of Hurricane Katrina.

There is no doubt that government will one day soon authorize construction of new fleet replenishment vessels ships to replace our ageing AORs. But, as long as Parliament and Canadian Forces leadership, remain willing to accept that our nation's future strategic, political and military options will be unnecessarily reduced by the continued absence of the seaborne joint expeditionary capability that comes with an amphibious ship, Canada, in my opinion, will not live up to its promise to become an influential global middle power.

In view of the geopolitical importance of this matter, and its relationship to the future defence and well being of the Canadian people, it is time for Mr. Harper to clearly state his government's intentions with regard to the fielding of a militarily credible enabling amphibious capability.

In this regard, an early decision to emulate the Australians and secure a Canadian equivalent to their new Canberra Class amphibious ships would be a positive and most welcome sign. **FL**

*Col (ret) Gary H. Rice works independently to strengthen Canada's defence structure.*

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