

## Strategy to Increase Maritime Visibility in all Dimensions: Canadian Viewpoint on Challenges and Opportunities



### **Dr. James Boutillier**

Special Advisor, N39 - International Engagement Maritime Forces Pacific Headquarters (Canadian Deligation)

We are, arguably, in the midst of a new maritime era, one unrivalled since the great age of seapower in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. While this is not an age of discovery, per se, it is one that is witnessing unparalleled levels of maritime commerce, global shipping, maritime exploration, hydrographic research, coastal and deepsea fishing, and naval activity, particularly in the Indo Pacific region. Indeed, the Indian Ocean is becoming the global centre of gravity for maritime affairs, criss-crossed as it is by vital sea lanes of communication and subject to increasing levels of naval competition.

These are day to day realities for residents of a seaport like Colombo, and while we are informed that the majority of the world's population lives within a few hundred miles of the sea, we still need to ask ourselves just how aware they are of the importance of seapower, in the fullest sense of the word. If they are not aware, and most experts would seem to agree that that is the case, how then should we best enhance maritime visibility? Clearly, this challenge is one that is subject to many variables. Are the inhabitants of an island nation more aware of seapower than their counterparts living on a continental landmass? Is maritime visibility a product of national experience? At first glance, the answer to both questions would

appear to be self-evident, but curiously, if we look at an island nation like Great Britain, where everyone lives relatively close to the sea and where national greatness was predicated on seapower, we find an astonishing degree of what the celebrated navalist, Geoffrey Till, called sea blindness. How is it possible that a nation that once boasted the greatest navy on the face of the earth should be so indifferent to maritime affairs now?

The object of this paper is to assess what the Canadian experience tells us about the factors that dictate maritime visibility and to reflect upon how those factors can be managed to enhance public understanding of and support for sea power? At its simplest, there appear to be two elements at work, domestic and international determinants. What is it about Canadian geography, institutional culture, and history that shape Canadian awareness of seapower? And what is it about Canada's international maritime experience that influences public awareness of the sea?

To begin with, Canada is extraordinarily vast; 152 times the size of Sri Lanka. Thus, while 85 percent of Canadians live well away from the sea (one might be able to challenge that assertion in the case of those living near the St Lawrence

River or the ocean-sized Great Lakes), no Sri Lankan lives more than about 65 miles from the sea. Curiously enough, there is a national myth in Canada that the best sailors in the Royal Canadian Navy in World War II came from the land-locked prairies, but the reason may very well be that farm-hardened lads, used to the dire privations of the Great Depression, found it easy to adapt to the rigours of naval life.

The Royal Canadian Navy, established in May 1910 and awarded its royal title in 1911 (it was known as maritime command briefly, after the unification of the armed services in Canada in the 1960s), has had two fleet headquarters and one administrative headquarter. The first fleet headquarters was established in Halifax, Nova Scotia. Halifax dated back to 1749 and was the principal port on the east coast of Canada. Right to the present day Halifax enjoys a certain primacy in RCN culture despite the fact that the Indian and Pacific Oceans have surpassed the Atlantic in terms of geostrategic importance. World War II convoys originated from Halifax and the to-the-death struggle with German U-boats in the North Atlantic was largely orchestrated from Halifax. When the war against the Third Reich came to an end in 1945, the Royal Canadian Navy segued seamlessly into a similar – if not more deadly – anti-submarine war against soviet submarines. While Russian boats operated in the Pacific, their primary theatre of operations was in the Atlantic and, thus, the importance of Halifax as a naval port and establishment came to be further reinforced and extended.

Meanwhile, a naval base came into being in Esquimalt (an area adjacent to Victoria which is the capital of the province of British Columbia on Canada's west coast), just as the RCN was being established. Unfortunately, the Esquimalt naval base was a victim of its own good fortune. The weather on the British Columbian coast tends to be more benign than that in the northwest Atlantic and the waters are enclosed. For these reasons, the naval base in Esquimalt (now named Maritime Forces Pacific) came to be selected as a training facility. At its simplest, the operational navy was based on Halifax while the training navy (which was considered necessary but, frankly, inferior and less relevant than the "fighting" navy)

was based on the west coast. Of course, at the time, the overwhelming importance of the Indo Pacific was yet to be realized, the Cold War was in progress with its emphasis on the Atlantic, and few Canadian policy planners were thinking about anything as unthinkable as the meteoric rise of a Chinese navy. What is telling, however, is that there was a major reorganization of the Royal Canadian Navy recently and naval history reasserted itself to the degree that the admiral in charge of Maritime Forces Pacific was given the responsibility for naval training, recruitment, and education while the admiral based in Halifax was given responsibility for naval operations. What this prioritization suggests is that more than a century after the standing up of the RCN, the importance of Halifax and its association with operations remains paramount.

For much of the history of the Royal Canadian Navy, the administrative headquarters was located in Ottawa, the national capital. This arrangement seemed eminently sensible from a practical and political perspective. Proximity enabled the senior admirals in charge of the RCN to have immediate access to the Minister of National Defence and other influential political players. Tellingly enough, when the three services (army, navy and airforce) services were unified briefly in the late 1960s, naval headquarters was re-located to Halifax. This was not a surprising choice for the reasons already enumerated, but what it meant was that the naval leadership was not only physically removed from the political arena in Ottawa but located still farther away from the naval formation on the west coast. Indeed, it is worth reflecting on the geography involved in the sense that upwards of 4000 miles separate Halifax from Esquimalt and the Rocky Mountains in British Columbia constitute an additional physical and perceptual barrier, diminishing the visibility of Esquimalt and the Pacific to decision-makers in Ottawa, let alone Halifax. Thus, the enormity of Canada works against the visibility of the RCN even for defence officials. The challenge is still greater for the average citizen because the navy inhabits two walled compounds at either end of a huge nation and when RCN vessels are deployed they are effectively out of sight, out of mind, even for those living near Halifax and Esquimalt.

As it happened, the naval leadership soon came to appreciate the error of its ways; that having the overall administrative headquarters in Halifax further reduced the visibility of the naval service in the eyes – and minds – of key policy makers in Ottawa. The RCN relocated to Ottawa because they came to realize that the other two services had a very distinct advantage in terms of visibility and political clout as a consequence of remaining headquartered in the nation's capital.

It has to be said that the naval leadership, captured by budgetary, personnel and operational matters, failed to give sufficient thought to increasing the navy's visibility. Part of the reason that they failed to do so was that sea blindness (only fully appreciated in this century) seemed to be such an intractable challenge to overcome. Navalists all agreed that it was not only a problem but one that needed to be addressed. However, no one seemed to know quite how to do it. It is vitally important to note that while the existential threat of Soviet submarine launched ballistic missiles was widely recognized during the Cold War, most Canadians confined that realization to their subconscious when it came to their day to day affairs. There was nothing as searing, as dangerous, and as immediate in the Canadian experience as the naval activities of the LTTE during the Sri Lankan civil war.

Another reason why maritime visibility was not such a concern, was the unconscious – or even conscious – realization that Canada was fortuitously protected by three vast oceanic moats. – the Atlantic, the ice-covered Arctic, and the Pacific – that held potential predators far from Canadian shores, for the most part. Certainly the rank and file of Canadians considered their nation almost impregnable. The totality of the Canadian military experience had been expeditionary; sending soldiers, sailors and airmen and women abroad to fight whether in Europe, South Africa, Afghanistan or the former Yugoslavia. There was very little, in fact, to suggest that threats might actually be directed at Canada's coasts.

Yet another critical consideration is the fact that, being co-located next to the world's most powerful military nation, Canadians enjoyed a supremely privileged position. Despite recent

political uncertainties, no two nations enjoy as intimate and constructive relationship as Canada and the United States. At its best, this has resulted in deeply impressive degree of military cooperation during peacetime and wartime. Canada, for example, works extraordinarily closely with the United States in the North American Air Defense organization or NORAD. Not only does NORAD have air defence and missile tracking capabilities but it has developed maritime domain awareness assets in the era since 9/11.

At sea, the relationship between the USN and the RCN has grown closer and closer since the end of the Cold War. In the 1990s Canadian warships came to supplement American carrier and surface action battle groups. Later still, RCN vessels came to replace US warships allocated for other duties. The sharing of intelligence, missile tracking facilities, personnel, training and mid-ocean fueling arrangements have deepened the relationship still further.

There is, however, a negative dimension to this defence relationship. Canadians, feeling that they live in what one Canadian senator famously referred to as a “fire proof box”, have come to rely on American support to the degree that some have asserted that Canada is failing to carry its share of the burden. While the figures can be challenged theologically, it seems perfectly clear that Canada has long failed to meet its commitments to NATO to spend 2 percent of its GDP on defence. A recent Canadian defence review holds out some promise that this deficit may be addressed over the next decade. Nonetheless, for the moment, the unconscious presumption is that in moments of crisis the Americans will make up for Canadian shortcomings.

The naval reserve is a critical element of the RCN and with reserve divisions located in many of the major Canadian cities, coast to coast, the reserves tend to be at the forefront of enhancing maritime visibility. Not only do the reserves involve the recruitment and training of citizen naval personnel (a significant number of whom have come to work nearly full time for the regular navy) but the reserve divisions are at the forefront of interacting with the “civilian world.” Accordingly, what we see is reserve personnel in

uniform undertaking parades on public holidays, appearing at major sporting events, and carrying out training exercises with high public visibility. What remains difficult to determine, however, is the exact degree to which their activities lead the average citizen to reflect on the critical importance of seapower.

Another important aspect of maritime visibility relates to media coverage. During Canada's long years in Afghanistan there was high – even intense – media coverage, in the field (with reporters embedded with army units in Kandahar and elsewhere) and at home (with troops departing or casualties being repatriated). Nothing of the sort has ever developed with the RCN. There is occasional maritime television coverage of ships companies deploying or returning (in which the attention is paid to the human interest element of family reunions rather than a discussion of the geostrategic importance of the mission), but few, if any, reporters actually deploy on operational vessels. Even if they were to do so, much of life at sea appears routine and uneventful compared with anti-Taliban patrols in Afghanistan. Thus, there is little media reinforcement of the vital role that the RCN plays in ensuring the maintenance of peace and good order at sea.

Over the years, Maritime Forces Pacific developed an increasingly ambitious deployment programme in the Pacific. In the 1990s and thereafter RCN vessels departed from the west coast to visit South America – principally Chile – and the western Pacific. A critical feature of these deployments is the daunting size of the Pacific Ocean which is about two to three times as wide as the Atlantic. A deployment from Esquimalt to Australia, for example, entails a round trip of roughly 16,000 miles. A deployment from Esquimalt to the northwest Indian Ocean (where MARPAC and Halifax-based warships operated for an extended period on anti-Taliban patrols after 9/11 and then on anti-piracy patrols) takes about 42 days of steaming. These are, self-evidently, major undertakings which tax a modest fleet of 15 or 16 ocean-going frigates and destroyers heavily. And yet, maritime visibility – being there, being seen, exercising, and conducting naval diplomacy – is absolutely essential if Canada is to establish

and sustain its reputation as a maritime nation committed to the Indo Pacific region.

During the past decade these deployments were necessarily abbreviated as each of the 12 Halifax-class, guided missile frigates was taken out of service for an extensive and intensive midlife refit. What this meant, in practice, was that for several years (in the period, roughly, 2012 to 2016) the east and west coast fleets were reduced in size quite severely and thus long-range deployments into the Indo Pacific region had, perforce, to be abbreviated.

The RCN is back in business now and committed to consistent deployment to the region. In keeping with that commitment, HMC Ships Ottawa and Winnipeg sailed into the Pacific in early 2017 and singularly or collectively visited Mumbai, Colombo, Singapore, Manila, Port Klang, Shanghai, Busan, Incheon, Kure and Tokyo. Significantly, there was a Canadian warship alongside Changi Naval Base during the 2017 International Maritime Defence Exhibition (IMDEX) as well as the Shangri-la Defense Dialogue.

In support of this revitalised deployment programme, the Royal Canadian Navy issued a seminal document in 2016 entitled “Leadmark 2050: Canada in a New Maritime World.” Leadmark seeks to introduce Canadians to the vital importance of seapower and thereby enhance the nation's maritime visibility. As Vice Admiral Mark Norman, the then Commander, RCN, noted, “Leadmark 2050 explains why Canada has a navy, what it does, and how it must evolve to meet future challenges.” This document is not a purely naval statement. Rather it seeks to explore the evolving complexities and enduring importance of the global maritime realm and locate the RCN within that context. It is written in a direct, unvarnished manner; easily assimilated by the non-specialist reader. It is, in many ways, an ideal model for those navalists around the world who are seeking to address the phenomenon of sea blindness.

While all this has been happening, Canada has acquired a third ocean. The Arctic was always there and Canadians were fairly conscious of the

fact, but the ocean was forbidding and almost impossible to navigate. Now all this is changing at a remarkable – some might say, alarming – speed. Sea ice is melting at an unprecedented rate and while the number of commercial vessels transiting the Arctic remains modest, to say the least, the trend lines are decidedly upwards. What this means is that the extent of Canadian awareness of maritime visibility is likely to increase markedly. While there are an average of 1200-1300 vessels approaching or departing from the Canadian west coast on any given day, they are not perceived by the general public as being in “our waters” in the way that they would be if they were transiting the Arctic. Furthermore, the RCN is in the process of building four to six Arctic and Offshore Patrol Ships, big vessels that will enable the navy to patrol Arctic seaways with increasing frequency in years to come. It must also be said that the carefully choreographed transit of the Arctic by the cruise ship *Crystal Serenity* in 2016 captured public imagination and reinforced – fleetingly at least – maritime visibility.

While Sri Lanka has no “third ocean” it is located athwart one of the busiest sea lanes in the world. In addition, it is in the cross hairs of an emerging naval rivalry which could transform the Indian Ocean into a major arena of maritime contestation. Sri Lanka is in the midst of illegal and unregulated fishing, human smuggling, arms trafficking, involuntary migration, and great power maneuvering. Thus, while Canada is to a considerable degree isolated from the stern realities unfolding at sea, Sri Lankans are exposed to daily events in the waters around their home that enhance their maritime awareness, voluntarily or involuntarily.

It is hard to make policy recommendations regarding the promotion of maritime visibility. The Canadian experience suggests that it is an uphill struggle to make the citizenry more aware of the criticality of seapower. As many have observed, seapower is like air; you don’t realise you need it until you have none to breathe. Canadians are blessed. Geography has held most threats at bay and a powerful neighbour constitutes a vital element of subconscious reassurance. The RCN is a highly professional and effective blue water navy but the average Canadian rarely reflects upon the day and night role that the navy plays in the oceanic approaches to Canada and in far distant seas.

Perhaps it could be said that Canada is almost unique among nations. Australia is, arguably, a close second in terms of the protection afforded to the nation’s shores by extensive maritime approaches. However, there is a vital demographic distinction. While the Canadian population is thinly spread, it is spread along a continental boundary, far from the sea. The Australian population is thinly spread but it is spread along the coast. That fact, coupled with the relative proximity of Asia, no doubt explains the significantly higher awareness of seapower in Australia than in Canada.

Sri Lanka is isolated by the sea, in a way, but it just so happens that that “sea” is among the most active on the planet. As a consequence, in a maritime age, it will be essential for the Sri Lankan Navy, opinion makers, and government officials to actively and consistently promote maritime visibility. The future integrity of the nation will depend upon it.