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JUSTIFYING THE NEED FOR AN AMPHIBIOUS CAPABILITY IN THE CANADIAN ARMED FORCES

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JUSTIFYING THE NEED FOR AN AMPHIBIOUS CAPABILITY IN THE CANADIAN ARMED FORCES

AIM

1. Capability Based Planning (CBP) is the responsibility of the Chief of Force Development (CFD). In Phase Two of the process, the Joint Capability Planning Team (JCPT) analyzes a set of force-planning scenarios based on both the Future Security Environment (FSE) and the defence priorities established for the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) in the Canada First Defence Strategy (CFDS).¹ As of June 2015, six of the ten scenarios had been analyzed by the JCPT. As a previous member of the JCPT, the aim of this paper is to argue in favour of an amphibious capability for the CAF; a capability that the JCPT (initially) assessed as essential for the CAF to successfully complete five of the six force-planning scenarios mentioned above.

INTRODUCTION

2. The CAF has not executed an amphibious operation since the allied invasion of Normandy, France, on 6 June 1944. Since then, the Department of National Defence (DND) has occasionally examined the validity of reintroducing an amphibious capability to the CAF, however, political desire and fiscal restraints over the years have precluded investment of such a capability into the CAF order of battle (ORBAT).

3. If there was ever a period in time that Canada needed an amphibious capability since the invasion of Normandy, it is now. The investment of such a capability would meet the requirements of the core missions outlined for the CAF in the CFDS. To demonstrate the effectiveness of possessing an amphibious capability, it will be argued that: a. possession of such

¹ Department of National Defence, *The Future Security Environment*. (Kingston: National Defence, 2009); Department of National Defence and the Canadian Forces, "Canada First Defence Strategy," last accessed 6 February 2016, <http://www.forces.gc.ca/en/about/canada-first-defence-strategy.page#q13>

a capability would increase the CAF overall combat capability through advancing the concept and execution of joint operations; b. the addition of an amphibious vessel would provide a sealift capability that does not currently reside within the CAF ORBAT; and c. an amphibious capability would increase Canada's ability to respond to non-combatant evacuation operations (NEO) and to global humanitarian and disaster relief operations which have increased in frequency in the past decade as a result of climate change.

DISCUSSION

Enhancing the CAF Joint Concept and Combat Capability

4. According to LGen (Retired) Michael Jeffrey, General Hillier's Canadian Forces (CF) transformation "was the start of what may be the most significant change to the CF in over half a century."² Hillier moved fast in implementing his vision and the result was a significant re-organization of operational command and control structures within the CF. With commands soon after established for domestic, expeditionary, logistical and special forces operations, the CF adopted the concept of joint operations with each command exercising operational control over forces generated for them by the environmental elements within the CF.

5. The term joint has become synonymous with any and all exercises and operations undertaken by the CF since 2005. Regrettably, the establishment of a joint command and control structure at the operational level does not equate to the elements of a force instituting an equal sense of "joint-ness" at the tactical level, particularly when such elements are denied the ways and means to accomplish such. As a result, differences in doctrine, tactical command and control systems, communication systems, and training, tactics and procedures (TTPs), are still prevalent between the army, navy, and air force at the tactical level. Lessons learned from recent

² Canadian Military Journal, "Inside Canadian Forces Transformation," last accessed 6 February 2016, <http://www.journal.forces.gc.ca/vol10/no2/04-jeffery-eng.asp>

joint/combined exercises, such as AMALGAM DART 13-01 in the fall of 2012 that involved participation of all environmental elements of the CF as well as the North American Aerospace Command (NORAD) and the United States Air Force (USAF), have demonstrated the validity of this statement.³

6. According to General Hillier, a vessel such as the previously proposed Joint Support Ship (JSS) would “help build a *truly* ‘joint’ navy, army, and air force capability.”⁴ General Hillier’s assessment was correct, however, it fell short of his previous statement that “the military’s future direction is focused on improved integration of air, land and sea elements which the SCF [Standing Contingency Force] provided.”⁵ Lacking any comprehension of the political and fiscal pressures that General Hillier faced at the time, his initial SCF statement was in fact true and the only means to make the CF *truly* joint is the ability to operate in the littoral. In order to operate in the littoral, a joint force requires an amphibious capability.

7. So why focus operations in the littoral? According to Vego,

70 percent of the world’s population live[s] within 200 miles of the coastline and some 80 per cent of the world’s capitals lie within 300 miles of the sea. Some 60 per cent of politically significant urban areas around the world are located within 25 miles of the coastline or 75 per cent of these areas are located within 150 miles.⁶

Hanlon emphasizes the significance of the littorals by indicating that governments can expect “chaos in the littorals” in the future.⁷ It is indeed correct that the littoral plays a

³ Department of National Defence. “AMALGAM DART 13-01 After Action Report (AAR)/Lessons Learned (LL)” available from the Department of National Defence (DND) Defence Wide Area Network (DWAN) – Knowledge Management System (KMS) intranet web-site.

⁴ Helicopter News, “Canada Looking To Buy Medium Lift Helicopters, Support Ships, Trucks,” last accessed 1 February 2016, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/202799446?pq-origsite=summon>

⁵ David Pugliese, “Canada Delays Special Forces Development,” *Defense News*, 19 March 2007.

⁶ Milan N. Vego, *Naval Strategy and Operations in Narrow Seas* (London: Frank Cass Publishers, 1999), 184.

⁷ Edward Hanlon, “Taking the Long View: Littoral Warfare Challenges,” in *The Role of Naval Forces in 21st Century Operations*, ed. Richard H. Shultz and Robert Pfaltzgraff, 155-161 (Washington, DC: Brassey’s, 2000), 155.

significant role in maintaining global peace and stability. The interruption of trade and commerce in the littoral domain, that is, major international ports that serve as the means for state imports and exports, could have a crippling global effect. Therefore, in order to counter threats to the global economy, nations must be prepared to effectively operate within both their and their trading partners littoral environments.

8. The North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) has also been emphasizing the future importance of joint operations in the littoral. The use of a Joint Headquarters within an amphibious vessel, "...provides the capability to perform command and control of joint land, air and maritime operations from an at sea operating base."⁸ By retaining forces within the amphibious vessel offshore, the joint force commander is provided the means to deescalate or escalate a conflict ashore. According to Allsopp, an amphibious ship provides joint forces significant flexibility through trans-littoral manoeuvre.⁹

9. In summary, the addition of an amphibious capability to the CAF ORBAT would force integration of the army, navy and air force elements at the tactical level and permit the evolution of common doctrine and TTPs as a result. The continued efforts between the elements would lead to greater integration and an actual joint force that is capable of meeting future threats, such as those identified in the FSE and NATO, in the littoral environment.

Sealift Capability for the CAF

10. The addition of an amphibious capability to the CAF ORBAT would also provide the CAF the organic means to transfer personnel and equipment globally. The previously proposed JSS would have provided such a function for the CAF as noted by the Minister of National

⁸ North Atlantic Treaty Organisation. *Concept for Joint Sea Based Operations - Draft* (Belgium: NATO, 2012). 1-12.

⁹ Jon Allsopp, "Beyond JSS: Analyzing Canada's Amphibious Requirement" (Joint Command and Staff Program Master in Defence Studies, Canadian Forces College, 2007), 44.

Defence, Gordon O'Connor, in 2006 when he stated, "Mobility is an essential capability that the men and women of the Canadian Forces need to get the job done."¹⁰

11. The CAF currently relies on the use of chartered vessels to meet its requirement for the global transport of its equipment to theatres of operation. There are limitations, however, in the use of such chartered vessels. For one, chartered shipping can only deliver the CAF equipment to a permissive littoral environment. As such, the port of arrival for the vessel must be non-threatening and possess the infrastructure necessary to off-load CAF personnel, equipment, stores, and ammunition. This poses a challenge for the CAF, as the vessel may need to proceed to a neutral port of entry that could be a significant distance from the actual theatre where the CAF will operate. Depending on the tactical circumstances of the case, CAF land forces may therefore be forced to enter a theatre from a disadvantageous tactical position. If the JSS project had of come to fruition, these vessels, with their proposed roll-on roll-off (RO-RO) capacity, would have also suffered this same limitation.

12. The use of chartered vessels reduces the ability to deploy rapidly and poses operational security risks. Although standing contracts exist between the CAF and chartered shipping companies, the CAF mobility requirements will always be in competition with domestic and international business demands placed on commercial shipping. The CAF therefore does not have control of the sealift assets it utilizes for global mobility nor the speed at which such assets can deploy its equipment into theatre. The inherent risk of using commercial shipping for CAF mobility was probably best demonstrated during the GTS Katie incident in the summer of 2000, where a contractual dispute between the shipping company and two other parties forced the CF

¹⁰ Helicopter News, "Canada Looking To Buy Medium Lift Helicopters, Support Ships, Trucks," last accessed 1 February 2016, <http://search.proquest.com/docview/202799446?pq-origsite=summon>

to board the vessel in order to gain control of the \$223 million dollars of CF equipment on board.¹¹

13. With respect to operational security, the use of commercial shipping also means that the CAF has to inform the shipping agency of details regarding the size and composition of equipment that must be moved along with the timelines for such moves and the specifics regarding the destination. The need to provide such information translates to significant risk as the enemy force will no doubt know the CAF posture, destination port and time of arrival long before leaving Canada.

14. Although the CAF possesses a strategic airlift capability, an amphibious vessel could carry the equivalent of hundreds of flights of C-17 transport aircraft, as noted by Thomas.¹² The CAF C-17 and C130J transport aircraft are also reliant on the use of airfield infrastructure, similar to commercial ship's and RO-RO's reliance on port infrastructure and docks. Although the C-17 and C130J aircraft are a valuable capability for the CAF, they do not possess the capacity or flexibility offered by an amphibious platform.

15. The acquisition of an amphibious capability for the CAF would alleviate such capability gaps and reduce risk. The ship-to-shore connectors embarked within an amphibious vessel would provide the Joint Task Force Commander an array of options when determining his or her forces point of entry into theatre as there would be no reliance on port infrastructure for the disembarkation of personnel or equipment. As such a vessel would be organic to the CAF ORBAT; the speed at which forces deploy and enter theatre would increase significantly. Finally, the CAF could maintain its operational security if it possessed such a capability.

¹¹ Department of National Defence and the Canadian Forces, "HMCS Athabaskan Carries Out Boarding of GTS Katie," last accessed 6 February 2016, <http://www.forces.gc.ca/en/news/article.page?doc=hmcs-athabaskan-carries-out-boarding-of-gts-katie/hnmx18xq>

¹² Canadian Naval Review, "Naval Support to Disaster Relief/Humanitarian Assistance?" last accessed 6 February 2016, <http://www.navalreview.ca/2010/01/naval-support-to-disaster-reliefhumanitarian-assistance/>

Increased Capability to Respond to Disasters

16. In discussing the global response to the Asian tsunami of 2004, Commodore (Retired) Lehre indicated that those states with an amphibious capability were able to react to the crisis the fastest.¹³ He went on to state that these countries, "...got there with hospitals, they got there with 20 or 30 helicopters on their amphibious ships that were able to deliver goods and supplies when all the roads and bridges had been knocked out."¹⁴ Although the Royal Canadian Navy (RCN) did not respond to the tsunami in 2004, the absence of an organic sealift capability restricts the CAF ability to respond to such disasters. During hurricane Katrina in September 2005, for example, Canada deployed a destroyer and two frigates along with the Canadian Coast Guard Ship (CCGS) *Sir William Alexander*. As the east coast's tanker was unavailable at the time, the CCGS was deployed with the Canadian Task Group (TG) in order to carry the bulk of relief supplies to the United States south coast. Although the destroyer and frigates also carried relief supplies, their storage capacity to embark humanitarian and disaster relief supplies is extremely limited. There are those who have equated using warships such as destroyers and frigates for carrying relief supplies to using Corvettes as dump trucks. It is also worth noting that these TG supplies had to be off-loaded in port, which meant that the ships had to assume significant risk by navigating into ports where navigational beacons and systems were unserviceable and hazards to shipping littered navigational entrances.

17. The CAF mission to Haiti following that country's devastating earthquake in 2010 demonstrated yet again the capability that an amphibious platform could bring to humanitarian assistance/disaster relief (HADR) operations. While the Royal Canadian Air Force (RCAF) awaited repairs to airfields in Haiti, the RCN ships *Athabaskan* and *Halifax* transported relief

¹³ David Pugliese, "Canada Delays Special Forces Development," *Defense News*, 19 March 2007.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

supplies ashore to Léogâne and Jacmel respectively via *Athabaskan*'s CH-124 helicopter and ship's boats. As note by Yves Engler, a journalist embarked in the TG "observed that they [*Athabaskan* and *Halifax*] didn't have much food, water, medical equipment or tents to distribute, beyond what they needed for their own crews." In stark contrast to the RCN vessels dispatched to Haiti, the United States Navy (USN) sent five amphibious platforms. One platform sent, the USS Bataan, has the capability of carrying three Landing Craft Air Cushion or 12 Landing Craft Mechanized along with an array of helicopters such as Sea Stallions, Hueys, or SH-60s. These ship-to-shore connectors would have may it easy for the ship's massive relief supplies to reach shore.

18. Another argument to justify the acquisition of an amphibious platform is the role that such a vessel could provide during NEO. While numerous countries deployed their amphibious platforms to Lebanon in 2006 to extract their citizens, the Government of Canada received significant domestic and international criticism for their delayed response. Had the CAF had an amphibious vessel in its ORBAT, it would have significantly increased Canada's response time to the crisis. Instead, the Canadian Government contracted civilian vessels to extract its citizens from Lebanon.

19. Thomas also notes that large HADR platforms, like amphibious ships, could also provide a floating hospital.¹⁵ Like other warships, an amphibious ship would possess its own on board sickbay; however, such platforms could also be reconfigured as required with a modularized on board hospital. Such a capability would not only provide care for forces operating ashore but also for victims during a natural disaster.

CONCLUSION

¹⁵ Canadian Naval Review, "Naval Support to Disaster Relief/Humanitarian Assistance?" last accessed 6 February 2016, <http://www.navalreview.ca/2010/01/naval-support-to-disaster-reliefhumanitarian-assistance/>

20. The employment of amphibious ships by other navies has demonstrated their effectiveness at achieving joint effects, projecting forces and effectively responding to global disasters. In the anticipated future operating environment, the CAF cannot afford to continue operating without an amphibious platform if it truly wishes to meet the core defence objectives outlined in the CFDS.

RECOMMENDATION

21. The RCN should continue to explore options to fulfill the amphibious capability gap present in the CAF. The navy is the obvious lead service to pressure the Government of Canada to acquire an amphibious platform. The addition of such a vessel to the RCN's Fleet would increase the operational effects the RCN and CAF could deliver for Canada and ensure the RCN's relevance in the future.

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