

Defence Policy Briefing

Replenishment ships are a naval necessity

There is a solution to our support ship dilemma, but it will require defence planners to put some water in their wine

JERROD RILEY

The initial design and acquisition of Canada's current support ships occurred under the government of John Diefenbaker in the early 1960s.

The vision and wisdom of the Diefenbaker government positioned Canada for the strategic successes that have occurred in the generations that have followed. Between 1967 and 2012, HMCS Protecteur, Preserver, and Provider have been deployed more than 55 times.

Their utility to the Royal Canadian Navy, and by extension the government of Canada, is beyond question. These ships have enabled our Navy to deploy independently to any part of the world in support of Canadian sovereignty and foreign policy, through a vast array of missions.

It is of grave concern that Canada is now at the cusp of losing this capability, as our two remaining ships near the end of their useful service life. Such a loss would have huge implications for Canada's place in the world, not to mention our ability to defend our vast ocean and Arctic approaches.



[HMCS Preserver refuels the US Navy frigate USS Ingraham.](#)

The government of Canada came very close to contracting to replace our aging supply ships with a new fleet of Joint Support Ships in 2008. While many, including the Navy League of Canada, lauded the

innovative design and new capabilities to be delivered through the JSS program, critical failures in our procurement system made the project untenable.

Since that time, the Harper government has established the National Shipbuilding Procurement Strategy, a masterful stroke of public policy which depoliticized how contracts would be awarded and set our shipbuilding industry on a path for long-term success.

The NSPS fixed one half of the procurement process. Unfortunately the remaining half, of how projects are developed and tendered, remains problematic. While a myriad of proposals have been presented on the issue of procurement reform, it will undoubtedly take time for the government to get the procurement process on course.

Unfortunately, in terms of our support ships, that is time we no longer have.

However, there is a solution to our support ship dilemma. It will require defence planners to put some water in their wine, but it will ensure that our vital support needs are met over the next 40 to 50 years.

By limiting additional capabilities that were to be introduced through the JSS project and adopting commercial building standards, the government of Canada can procure more traditional support ships that will preserve our capability to deploy task groups, provide meaningful logistical support to our allies and humanitarian assistance to any of the more than five billion people that live in coastal regions.

This will also ultimately allow Canada's Navy to support the deployment of any additional new capabilities as they develop.

This approach will better enable the government to deliver these replacement vessels within the currently available budget; a critical factor as we endeavour to balance our budget and reduce our debt. It will also ensure the new vessels can be delivered on time, before we lose the capability to send our ships wherever we need them to be.

While Canada will not initially gain the new capabilities for additional humanitarian aid and disaster relief proposed under JSS, we will maintain essential logistical support capabilities for deploying both naval and ground forces. The development of additional capabilities can come later through the procurement of an additional specialized ship or ships, when the nation's finances permit and when the requirements are clearly defined.

This common sense approach will solve one of the biggest procurement issues facing our Navy. Getting on with the critically needed naval support ships will lay the needed foundation for the future and allow both the government and the bureaucracy the time and resources to dedicate to long-term procurement reform and the host of other equipment replacement programmes currently on the table.

Jerrod Riley is a member of the Navy League of Canada.