

## Patrolling the Arctic

Since the Conservative government announced the Canada First Defence Strategy in 2008 that they were pursuing the possibility of acquiring Arctic warships, criticisms and options have been proposed by many with interest in the issue. The culmination of this discussion is the Arctic/Offshore Patrol Ship (AOPS) Project. The reality is that regardless of the debate around these vessels, Canada needs some sort of presence in the Arctic. The ice mass is receding and commercial interests are rising. Whether it be to monitor fisheries, patrol the EEZ, or assist in SAR activities, Canada needs the right mix of government capabilities in order to operate in the diverse and hostile Arctic environment and meet requirements beyond those of icebreaking and scientific work.

In comes the AOPS. The proposal for these ships is to include as many multi-role capabilities as possible. The most important thing is that they will be capable of operating in an environment that no other RCN vessel is currently able to operate in save for the mildest months of the Arctic summer. Although the idea of having armed ships patrol the Arctic originated with the Mulroney government in the 1980s, the current AOPS project was initially announced in 2008. After years of discussions and study, the current project is currently at the stage where Halifax Shipyards is actually reviewing the design. Under the government's NSPS programme, the AOPS will be the first combat ships to be built by Halifax Shipyards. The target is for a 2015 awarding of the implementation contract that would see the first ship enter service around 2018 and the final ship by 2023.

In addition to this schedule, the government has indicated that the total number of ships will be between 6 and 8. While the final number will be determined by cost, every effort must be made to ensure that the government acquires 8 of these vessels. The primary reason being that not every vessel is always ready for deployment due to maintenance schedules and the Navy's graduated readiness system. As well as having to account for ships being in maintenance, the simple fact that the Arctic as well as adjoining portions of the Atlantic and Pacific is an immense domain that will require more than a single ship. One intent of the NSPS, by naming Halifax Shipyards as one of the two shipbuilding centres of excellence in Canada, is to achieve efficiencies and savings throughout the shipbuilding project to allow for the acquisition of 8 vessels. As this is the first combat vessel project to go forward under NSPS, this project will undoubtedly become a case study for future projects such as the Canadian Surface Combatant, meaning that success is even more important.

Like any project, AOPS is not without critics. While there are several areas that have been identified by skeptics, perhaps some of the most important ones revolve around the issues of speed, armament, and ice-breaking capabilities. In all of these areas, the AOPS will be doing exactly what it is being designed to do and what Canada needs it to do.

To address the concern of speed, it would be good to compare the AOPS to Canada's current patrol fleet; the MCDVs. Maritime Coastal Defence Vessels that are currently being used by the RCN have a maximum speed of 15 knots. That is very similar to the AOPS proposed 14 to 17 knot goal as outlined in the project deliverables. Furthermore, it must be remembered that in the Arctic environment, there are still many hazards to shipping that force ships to operate in a

slower speed, meaning that a higher speed is not as crucial as it would be if the ships were operating in say, the open Atlantic or Pacific. Additionally, the AOPS are being designed to operate with helicopters aboard, meaning that they will be able to extend the range and capabilities of the ship alone.

The weapon systems are another area where some have raised concerns. With the design to include a small gun, some have said that these ships are little more than slightly upgraded commercial vessels. The largest issue here is that there really isn't a need for a large armament for the AOPS. These ships are not being asked to conduct combat operation, but to patrol and demonstrate presence in the Arctic. For this purpose, even a small deck gun would more than suffice.

Finally, the fact that the AOPS are only being designed to operate in first year sea ice and some small multi-year obstructions is not really as much of a concern as we would be led to believe. When it comes to operating in and patrolling the Arctic, there is rarely a need for a surface vessel to be present whenever the entire Arctic ocean is frozen. The AOPS would be designed to monitor things more in the line of commercial traffic in the form of cruise ships, fishing, and cargo transport and they will not be present in the really thick ice conditions. Consequently, having a ship that is only capable of operating in first-year ice conditions is not a problem and will generate a capability that the RCN currently does not have with any other ships in the fleet.

The Arctic ice mass is melting, sea routes are opening, and commercial interests are growing. Whether it be gas and mining exploration, fisheries, or pleasure cruises, Canada needs some sort of military asset in the Arctic to monitor, assist, and enforce whenever needed. The reality is that even today without ice-capable ships, the RCN is the only government agency that is capable of mounting multi-agency operations at sea whether in the Pacific, Atlantic, or Arctic. Having AOPS in the Arctic lets others know that Canada is watching and its simple presence will help to deter any types of violations from environmental to criminal. AOPS will add a very valuable capability to patrol the Arctic in addition to having a frigate occasionally in the Arctic for a month in the summer or just having drones patrol. AOPS broadens Canada's capabilities to take on its full responsibility and look after its Arctic territory. Actual ships with people on board complete with the ability to operate for extended periods in the Arctic environment is precisely what Canada needs, and the AOPS programme is the solution. No idea is perfect, but AOPS is going to do exactly what Canada needs it to do.