

# Canadian Gunboat Diplomacy

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Region: [Canada](#), [Latin America & Caribbean](#), [USA](#)

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*Former Prime Minister Kim Campbell once said “an election is no time to discuss important issues.” But surely the opportunity to free up \$40 billion while making the world a safer place ought to spark a discussion about the Canadian Navy’s role in the world.*

Four years ago the Conservatives announced the National Shipbuilding Procurement Strategy, a \$30-\$40 billion effort to expand the combat fleet over three decades. But, the initiative is stalled and this is a perfect time to consider other priorities, such as putting the money into a national daycare program, building co-op/public housing, investing it in light rail or using it to make higher education more affordable.

Let’s have a debate and let Canadians choose.

The first step is understanding how the Canadian Navy uses its warships.

People seldom think of Canadian foreign policy when the term “gunboat diplomacy” is used, but they should. It is not just the USA, Great Britain, France or other better-known imperial powers that have used naval force as a “diplomatic” tool.

Nearly a century ago the Royal Bank loaned \$200,000 to unpopular Costa Rican dictator Federico Tinoco just as he was about to flee the country. A new government refused to repay the money, saying the Canadian bank knew the public despised Tinoco and that he was likely to steal it. “In 1921,” Canadian Gunboat Diplomacy notes, “in Costa Rica, [Canadian vessels] Aurora, Patriot and Patrician helped the Royal Bank of Canada satisfactorily settle an outstanding claim with the government of that country.”

In another chapter of the 2000 book titled “Maple Leaf Over the Caribbean: Gunboat Diplomacy Canadian Style” Royal Military College historian Sean Maloney writes: “Since 1960, Canada has used its military forces at least 26 times in the Caribbean to support Canadian foreign policy. In addition, Canada planned three additional operations, including two unilateral interventions into Caribbean states.”

While the Canadian Navy has long flexed its muscles in the Western hemisphere, over the past decade the Canadian Navy has played a greater role in Africa. In the summer of 2008 Canada took command of NATO’s Task Force 150 that worked off the coast of Somalia. Between the start of 2013 and fall of 2015 Canadian warships HMCS Regina and HMCS Toronto participated in a 28-nation Combined Maritime Forces operation in the Arabian Sea and Indian Ocean. At the start of 2015 twenty-six Canadian Armed Forces members participated in the multinational maritime security exercise Cutlass Express 2015. Sponsored by the US Africa Command (AFRICOM), it took place off the East African coast.

As part of what's been dubbed Africa's "encirclement by U.S. and NATO warships", HMCS Athabaskan led Operation Steadfast Jaguar 2006 in the Gulf of Guinea. A dozen warships and 7,000 troops participated in the exercise, the first ever carried out by NATO's Rapid Response Force.

The following year HMCS Toronto participated in a six-ship task group of the Standing Naval Maritime Group 1 of NATO that traveled 23,000 kilometres around the continent. The trip took five months and was the first NATO fleet to circumnavigate Africa. HMCS Toronto spent a year preparing for this trip, a journey costing Canadian taxpayers \$8 million.

Oil largely motivated operations off Nigeria's coast. Nigeria's Business Day described NATO's presence as "a show of force and a demonstration that the world powers are closely monitoring the worsening security situation in the [oil-rich] Niger Delta." A Canadian spokesperson gave credence to this interpretation of their activities in a region long dominated by Shell and other Western oil corporations. When the Standing Naval Maritime Group 1 warships patrolled the area Canadian Lieutenant Commander Angus Topshee told the CBC that "it's a critical area of the world because Nigeria produces a large amount of the world's light crude oil, and so when anything happens to that area that interrupts that flow of oil, it can have repercussions for the entire global economy."

More broadly, the objective of circumnavigating the continent was to develop situational knowledge of the various territorial waters, especially Nigeria and Somalia. How knowledge of countries' coastlines was to be used was not made entirely clear, but it certainly wasn't to strengthen their sovereignty. "During the voyage," according to a story in Embassy, "the fleet sailed at a distance of 12 to 15 miles off the African coast, just beyond the limits of sovereign national waters. The NATO fleet did not inform African nations it would soon be on the horizon. This, Lt.-Cmdr. Topshee says, was an intentional move meant to 'keep options open.' 'International law is built on precedent,' he says. 'So if NATO creates a precedent where we're going to inform countries, we're going to operate off their coastline, over time that precedent actually becomes a requirement'." To help with the legal side of the operations a lawyer circumnavigated the continent with HMCS Toronto.

Reportedly, the Nigerians did not appreciate NATO's aggressive tactics. Topshee described the Nigerians as "downright irate" when the fleet approached. "There was real concern they might take action against us."

For HMCS Toronto's Captain Stephen Virgin, the circumnavigation was largely about preparing NATO forces for a future invasion. "These are areas that the force might have to go back to some day and we need to operate over there to get an understanding of everything from shipping patterns to how our sensors work in those climates."

In early 2011, 15 days before the UN Security Council authorized a no-fly zone over Libya, HMCS Charlottetown left Halifax for the North African country. Two rotations of Canadian warships enforced a naval blockade of Libya for six months with about 250 soldiers aboard each vessel.

Later that year, on May 19, HMCS Charlottetown joined an operation that destroyed eight Libyan naval vessels. The ship also repelled a number of fast, small boats and escaped unscathed after a dozen missiles were fired towards it from the port city of Misrata. After the hostilities the head of Canada's navy, Paul Maddison, told Ottawa defence contractors that HMCS Charlottetown "played a key role in keeping the Port of Misrata open as a critical

enabler of the anti-Gaddafi forces.”

On one occasion a Canadian warship, part of a 20-ship NATO flotilla purportedly enforcing the UN arms embargo on Libya, boarded a rebel vessel filled with ammunition. “There are loads of weapons and munitions, more than I thought,” a Canadian officer radioed HMCS Charlottetown commander Craig Skjerpen. “From small ammunition to 105 howitzer rounds and lots of explosives.” The commander’s response, reported the Ottawa Citizen, was to allow the rebel ship to sail through.

The National Shipbuilding Procurement Strategy will give Canadian officials greater means to bully weaker countries. Surely, one of the opposition parties sees a better way to spend \$40 billion dollars.

**Yves Engler** is the author of *Canada In Africa: 300 years of aid and exploitation* and will be speaking across the country in the lead up to the election. *For information: [Yvesengler.com](http://Yvesengler.com)*

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