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## Between a Rock and a Hard Place: Canada's Policy Challenges in the Indo-Pacific

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**JCSP 46 DL**

**Solo Flight**

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**BETWEEN A ROCK AND A HARD PLACE:  
CANADA’S POLICY CHALLENGES IN THE INDO-PACIFIC**

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## INTRODUCTION

The Indo-Pacific has become the world's economic center of gravity. In the past number of years, its combined economic output has grown equivalent to the combined economic capacity of the remainder of the world. In response to the regions' increasing strategic importance and emerging threats, other global powers have redefined traditional geographic concepts resulting in the emergence of the Indo-Pacific as a global region. The region encompasses the intersection of the Indian and Pacific Oceans and captures much of South and Southeast Asia, Australia, and parts of the Arabian Peninsula. Within this area are some of the world's most strategically valuable waterways linking the energy-rich states of the Persian Gulf with the rapidly developing states in Southeast Asia.<sup>1</sup>

In tandem with its growing economic influence, the region's major powers are becoming increasingly confident and assertive in the geopolitical sphere. For example, China is actively pursuing policies motivated by a desire to increase its global influence. In doing so, it seeks to eclipse US regional hegemony. In support of these objectives, China is actively building the capabilities to project power into the strategically valuable waterways encompassing some of the world's busiest trade routes include the Straits of Malacca and the South China Sea.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Huiyao, Wang. In 2020, Asian Economies Will Become Larger Than The Rest Of The World Combined - Here's How. The World Economic Forum. July 25, 2019.

<sup>2</sup> Das, Udayan. What Is the Indo-Pacific? Like every imaginative space, the Indo-Pacific is a construct of contested interpretation. The Diplomat. July 13 2019.



**Figure 1 -- Map of the Indo-Pacific Region**

Source: The German Institute for Global and Area Studies (GIGA)

In response to the region's growing geopolitical/economic importance, Japan has proposed the Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) strategy to manage the developing power dynamics through multilateral governance. The FOIP calls for a network of states and multilateral forums that value the rule of law, freedom and market economics<sup>3</sup>. The strategy has three main objectives, 1) maintaining the rules-based economic order, 2) pursuing economic prosperity, and 3) a commitment to peace and security<sup>4</sup>. Since its introduction, the FOIP has gained traction among some of the region's most established democracies, including the US and Australia. Meanwhile, India, while skeptical of China, has yet to commit itself fully to the concept.

For its part, Canada has embraced neither the Indo-Pacific concept nor the FOIP. This is despite the considerable overlap between the liberal democratic values that underpin the FOIP

<sup>3</sup> Szechenyi, Nicholas, Hosoya Y. "Working Toward a Free and Open Indo-Pacific." The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. 10 October 2019.

<sup>4</sup> Japan, 'A New Foreign Policy Strategy: "Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy."' [www.asean.emb-japan.go.jp](http://www.asean.emb-japan.go.jp)

and Canada's regional foreign policy. Indeed, Canada's objectives of building partnerships, strengthening economic ties, and providing development assistance could all be furthered through deeper alignment with like-minded states. The opportunity to work with like-minded nations to ensure continued adherence to a rules-based order premised on democratic values presents a compelling argument in favour of Canada joining the FOIP. Many of the states that favour the FOIP share similar values and have a longstanding relationship with Canada.

Despite a general alignment behind the FOIP, states that have adopted the policy do not share a common vision for its fulfilment. Japan and Australia have historically advanced foreign policies premised on trade. The FOIP offers these states an opportunity to develop and protect their trade regimes. On the other hand, the US has historically focused its foreign policy on security and views the FOIP as an opportunity further to strengthen its already dominant security position in the region.

These competing visions present a key challenge to Canadian policymakers. In one sense, the FOIP seems ideal for Canada to advance its national interest by employing its well-honed expertise in building consensus through multilateralism. However, a formal commitment to the concept presents the potential to be viewed by some as an appendage of US foreign policy. This policy is hawkish on China, the region's dominant power. As a result, Canada risks (further) undermining its relationship with Beijing and limiting its freedom of action to engage in bilateral relations with other states across the region.

These considerations give rise to the question; given the potential benefits and risks associated with aligning itself with the FOIP, should Canada adopt the concept as the cornerstone of its foreign policy in the region? The paper will answer this question by arguing that Canada should not adopt the FOIP. Instead, it should dovetail its foreign policies with

elements of the FOIP that align with Canadian interests and values while avoiding those elements that risk undermining its bilateral relationships.

The paper will examine the issue by considering how the three elements of Canada's regional policy align with the FOIP. It will draw insight from current sources, including expert assessments from bipartisan think tanks, such as the Macdonald-Laurier Institute, the Canadian Global Affairs Institute, and the Asia Pacific Foundation of Canada.

## **SECTION 1: BUILDING PARTNERSHIPS THROUGH ENGAGEMENT**

Canada has a long history with multilateralism and has engaged in regional dialogues for several decades<sup>5</sup>. It is, for example, a member of Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC), a founding member of the Asian Development Bank, and is a member of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Regional Forum and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank.

Despite this history, Canada's diplomatic efforts in the region do have significant limitations. Chief among these are its historical focus on Eastern facing multilateralism.<sup>6</sup> This focus and geographic proximity to the US have led to a North Atlantic-centric policy emphasis.<sup>7</sup> However, the Indo-Pacific's rapid economic rise has led to demographic, trade, and cultural pressures forcing Canada to revisit its traditional multilateral approach. This inflection point presents an opportune time for Canada to consider adopting the FOIP.

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<sup>5</sup> Miller J. Berkshire. "Canada and the Indo-Pacific: A Need for a Strategic Course." Canadian Global Affairs Institute. March 2021, 1.

<sup>6</sup> Wyeth Grant. "Canada's Indo-Pacific pivot." The Lowy Institute. 23 September 2019.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

This said, Canada must be cautious in its approach to multilateralism. Given its strong bilateral relationship with the US, there is a significant potential for Canada's regional agenda to be dominated by policies that complement US priorities. For its part, the US views the FOIP as an opportunity to build a consensus around containing the region's burgeoning economic and political influence.<sup>8</sup> A close alignment with US foreign policy will undermine Canada's relationship with states wary of US hegemony. To avoid this scenario, Canada's approach to regional engagement should seek to empower existing multilateral forums and recognized governance structures such as those built by the United Nations, the World Trade Organization, and the World Health Organization.<sup>9</sup> As a middle power, Canada has a better chance of swaying international relations in its favourer through multilateralism rather than direct bilateral relations with either the US or China.

This is not to say that Canada's regional policy should be passive. After all, Canada is competing for influence with many other global powers. However, its actions must demonstrate value in areas where Canada can make a substantial and original contribution.<sup>10</sup> Canadian foreign policy's Women Peace and Security Agenda is one potential area where Canada can offer a meaningful value proposition to states in the region.<sup>11</sup> In other words, Canada's approach should be founded on a uniquely Canadian vision that is realistic about its diplomatic bandwidth while leveraging its existing strengths to build on existing relationships in the region. To do this,

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<sup>8</sup> Navarro Juan. "How an Indo-Pacific approach could support Canada's economic recovery strategy." Trade Ready. 23 February 2021.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> Martel Stéphanie. "A New Regional Order in the "Indo-Pacific"? Lessons for Canada." The Network for Strategic Analysis. 24 February 2020.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

Canada should focus its bilateral and multilateral engagements on areas where it can build sustainable solutions.<sup>12</sup>

The advent of the digital economy has opened a second potential avenue for Canada to leverage its strengths. While primarily driven by mercantile interest, the digital economy is, in reality, a subset of a more prominent topic that spans digital governance and foreign policy.<sup>13</sup> Canada can advance its interest in this domain by using its strong position in cyber governance and diplomacy. Canada has a longstanding history of navigating the nexus between diplomacy and cyber governance and has maintained a strong working relationship with other advanced economies in this space.<sup>14</sup> Besides these bilateral relationships, Canada has worked with other nations using a multilateral approach premised on a coordinated response to cybersecurity, regulation and governance.<sup>15</sup>

Despite its strengths and achievements in digital diplomacy, Canada stands to gain from increased engagement with like-minded states on cyber-governance. This reality makes for a compelling argument favouring the FOIP, as most states that advocate the strategy are liberal democracies. Deeper integration of cyber governance and security with such nations will enable Canada to contribute to regional stability in this area. However, Canada is already a Five Eyes partner and benefited from this relationship well before the FOIP was introduced. Moreover, its successful engagements with other democratic states on information sharing have already

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<sup>12</sup> Nagy Stephen. “Indo-Pacific Resilience, Prosperity and Stability: Canada’s Capabilities-led Approach to Strategic Free and Open Indo-Pacific Engagement.” Canadian Global Affairs Institute. March 2021, 1.

<sup>13</sup> Stephenson Don. “Fostering Growth in Digital Trade through Bilateral Cooperation in the Development of Trade Rules.” Center for International Governance Innovation. 30 June 2020, 1.

<sup>14</sup> Nagy Stephen. “Indo-Pacific Resilience, Prosperity and Stability: Canada’s Capabilities-led Approach to Strategic Free and Open Indo-Pacific Engagement.” Canadian Global Affairs Institute. March 2021, 5.

<sup>15</sup> Carvin Stephanie. “Canada and Cyber Governance: Mitigating Threats and Building Trust.” Center for International Governance Innovation. ND.

enabled the development of cyber governance structures beyond the Five Eyes.<sup>16</sup> Canada's global cyber diplomacy and governance approach should ensure it builds on existing and proven relationships developed over years of trust-building. Canada must be cautious not to disregard these gains for the latest fad in international relations.<sup>17</sup>

Canada's approach to engagement in the region should seek to use the consensus among states favouring the FOIP regarding a need to preserve the rules-based order to strengthen existing multilateral forms. As a longstanding partner in regional dialogue, Canada is well-positioned to strengthen a rules-based approach to governance that supports regional stability and its unique policy objectives.

## **SECTION 2: ECONOMIC TIES**

Canada's best-developed relationships within the region are in the economic domain. China and Japan are Canada's second and third most significant trading partners. Moreover, Canada is a founding member of the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), which opens substantial growth vectors. These relationships are the result of a long history of a mercantile focus on regional engagement.

However, the region's strategic significance now goes beyond the economic domain, and Canada can no longer rely exclusively on economic relations for influence in the area. Moreover, developing geopolitical tensions within the region mean that Canada must navigate tense

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<sup>16</sup> Ciuriak Dan. "Canada In the Indo-Pacific - Shifting Economic, Geographic and Technological Context." Macdonald-Laurier Institute. 1 March 2021.

<sup>17</sup> Martel Stéphanie. "A New Regional Order in the "Indo-Pacific"? Lessons for Canada." The Network for Strategic Analysis. 24 February 2020.

relationships between its two largest trading partners, the US and China. For Canada to build on its trading history in the region, it must walk several tight lines.

First, it must balance its existing trade relationship with the US against significant growth opportunities in China. The size and scope of Canada's trade with China mean this bilateral relationship is a crucial aspect of its foreign policy within the region. However, its trading relationship with China dwarfs in comparison to that of the US. In 2019, 73% of Canadian exports and 57% of its imports were traded with the US. These figures compare to 4% of exports and 11% of imports traded with China.<sup>18</sup> As a result, Canada can ill afford to pursue regional policy objectives that contradict US foreign policy. On the other hand, the size and scope of China's development potential meant that this trading relationship has significant room for growth. Moreover, Canada's trading relationship with China is significantly larger than other economies in the region, accounting for 51.1 % of its imports from the region and 33% of exports.<sup>19</sup>

Second, Canada must strike a balance between its political and economic interests. The FOIP can position Canada well in the political sphere as many close allies favour the approach. These allies share Canada's interest in democratic values and liberal economic policies. However, deepening political alignment along the US visions of the FOIP runs the risk of exposing Canada to becoming further ensnared in the region's developing struggle for economic and political hegemony. The fallout from the Meng Wanzhou case and the two Michaels are recent examples of Canada being caught between the interests of the US and China.

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<sup>18</sup> AJG Simoes, CA Hidalgo. The Economic Complexity Observatory: An Analytical Tool for Understanding the Dynamics of Economic Development. Workshops at the Twenty-Fifth AAAI Conference on Artificial Intelligence. (2011).

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

Other potentially grave fault lines are developing within the region that could pose a potential threat to Canada's bilateral relationships with China. Both Hong Kong and Taiwan are significant trading and cultural partners. Both have an uneasy relationship with China. As a result, Canada must develop a nuanced approach to engagements with these partners. Such an approach may not be possible should Canada choose to place its regional foreign policy under the umbrella of the FOIP, given the strategic priorities of the US.

In the trade arena, Canada has the opportunity to advance its interests while advocating values that align with the FOIP without necessarily embracing the concept. While China is its largest regional economic partner, its combined trading relations with like-minded states in the region are not insignificant. For example, trade with Japan, South Korea, India, Hong Kong, Singapore, and Taiwan accounts for 43% of Canada's exports to the region. These economies all reflect, to some extent, the liberal democratic values inherent in the FOIP. They represent opportunities for Canada to deepen economic, political and security ties with like-minded states without binding themselves to a strategy that has the potential to limit its freedom of action.

### **SECTION 3: PEACE AND STABILITY**

Canada's engagement in the region has historically focused on trade while its security role has been modest.<sup>20</sup> However, Canada can make meaningful contributions to the region's security by dovetailing its unique expertise with its allies' strategic priorities. While Canada may not be able to project hard power, it has achieved some success in the region through engagements with the softer side of the security domain. Its human security-driven interventions

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<sup>20</sup> Grinius, Marius. "Canada and Asia: Prosperity and Security." Canadian Global Affairs Institute. June 2018, 1.

in Tonga helped to stabilize the water supply.<sup>21</sup> As a result of success like this, many states in the regions have expressed an interest in deepening Canada's commitment to stability in the region by contributing the humanitarian assistance and disaster relief efforts.<sup>22</sup>



**Figure 2 – Rain Water Collection and Purification System in Tonga**

Source: Humanitarian Coalition

Beyond the soft approach, Canada can help to stabilize the region by deeper military integration with like-minded powers. Looking beyond its already strong bilateral relationship with the US, Canada could stand to gain by strengthening its defence integration with Japan and Australia.<sup>23</sup> The 2019 coordinated Kaedex (Japanese for Maple Leaf) naval exercise is one

<sup>21</sup> Paskal Cleo. "Oceania and Canada: Building Bridges in the Free and Open Indo-Pacific." Canadian Global Affairs Institute. March 2021, 3.

<sup>22</sup> Miller, Jonathan Berkshire and Wilkins Thomas. "The Role for Middle Powers in the Free and Open Indo-Pacific: Looking at Opportunities for Canada and Australia." Japan Review Vol.3 No.1 Summer 2019, 47.

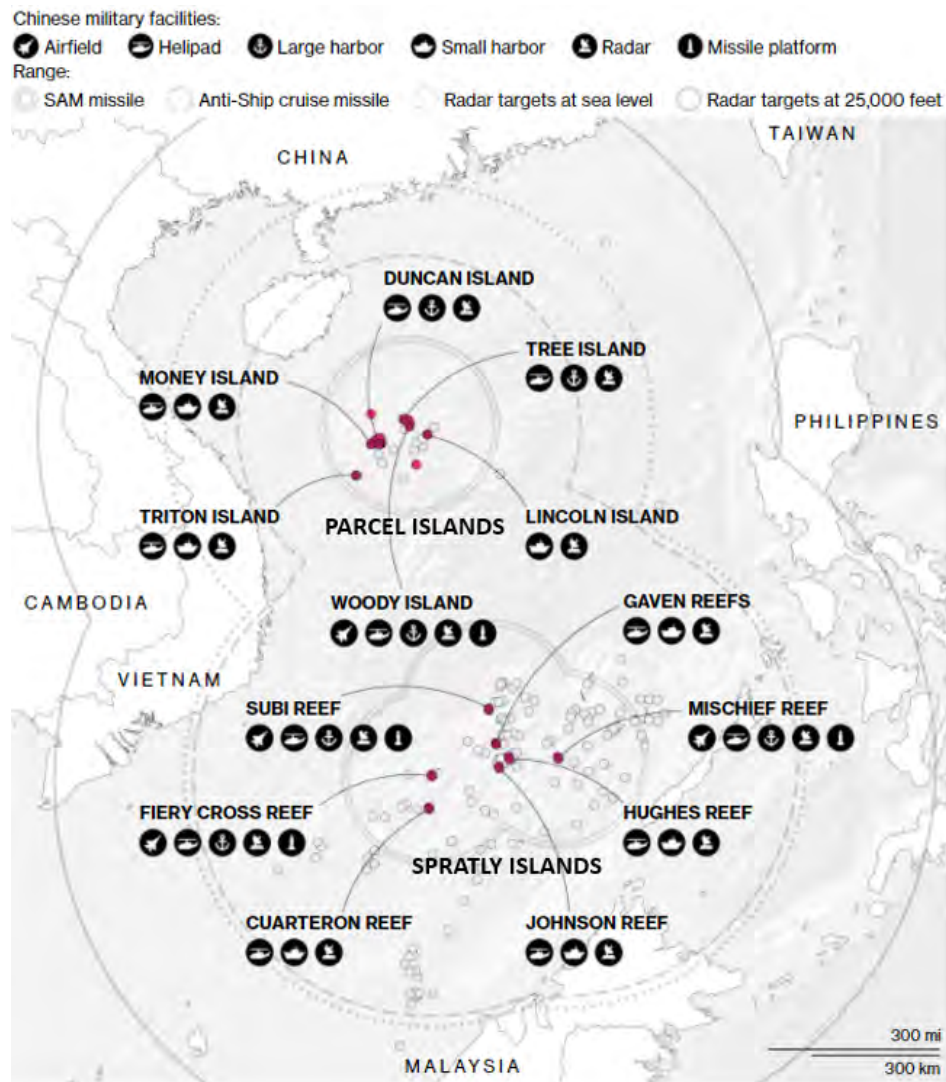
<sup>23</sup> Ibid, 4.

example of such cooperation. Canada could also contribute more by employing intelligence-gathering capabilities to improved maritime awareness along crucial sea lanes of communication, such as the East and South China Seas.<sup>24</sup>

Recent developments within the region's waterways form the most significant security challenge faced by the region's democratic states. For some time, China has asserted sovereignty claims in these waters by building sea and air defences capabilities in islands and islets in both seas. In combination with its increasingly capable blue water navy, this insulation has given China the capacity to execute sea denial in both waterways. Moreover, with China's economic rise has come a correspondingly increasing reliance on energy imports. Much of the energy flows through the Straits of Malacca, a waterway outside of China's territorial claims. This is seen as a key vulnerability to the Chinese, one that they aim to mitigate through power projection capacity.

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<sup>24</sup> Nagy Stephen. "Indo-Pacific Resilience, Prosperity and Stability: Canada's Capabilities-led Approach to Strategic Free and Open Indo-Pacific Engagement." Canadian Global Affairs Institute. March 2021, 4.



**Figure 3. China's Security Infrastructure in the South China Sea**

Source: Leigh, Karen, Martin, Peteran and Leung Adrian. "Troubled Waters: Where the US and China Could Clash in the South China Sea."

This threat is among the issues that led to the recognition that collective action is necessary to ensure the continuation of a rules-based order within the region. In other words, they are among the factors leading other global power to adopt the FOIP.

The US, for example, has used the FOIP to refocused its security by emphasizing a peace through strength policy. As a result, its vision of the FOIP seeks to maintain its military hegemony in the Indo-Pacific.<sup>25</sup> In this respect, Canada is not well-positioned to benefit or contribute to the FOIP.

An alternative course open to Canada is greater participation in the Quad-Lateral Security Dialogue (Quad), which, in many ways, aligns military capability with the FOIP. The strength of this option is that it allows Canada to show a commitment to its traditional allies, such as the US, Australia and Japan, while building deeper defence ties with other states, including India.

This option is not without its risks. Given the importance of its bilateral relationship with China, Canada must carefully consider the benefits and costs of such a move. Beijing views the Quad with similar skepticism to its views on the FOIP. Ever mindful that the US and its allies used containment to great effect against the USSR during the cold war, China sees both the FOIP and the Quad as opportunities for the US to strengthen its security capabilities and network in the region. As such, China is unlikely to look favourably upon any state that seeks to enhance US military capabilities in the region.

Despite this limitation, Canada has shown a willingness to use defence diplomacy to support its allies. Royal Canadian Navy vessels regularly traverse the Taiwan Strait, drawing criticism for China.<sup>26</sup> Moreover, Canada is a regular participant in the Rim of the Pacific (RIMPAC) naval exercise.

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<sup>25</sup> Reeves Jeffrey. "Canada and the Indo-Pacific: An Asia Pacific Foundation of Canada Policy Paper". Asia Pacific Foundation of Canada. September 2020, 117.

<sup>26</sup> Chase, Steven. "For second time in three months, Canadian warship transits Taiwan Strait." The Globe and Mail. 10 September 2019.

While Canada has not adopted a leadership role in the region's security, its existing relationships offer ample opportunity to build a security policy specific to Canada's national interest. Canada has demonstrated a willingness to conduct "show-the-flag" during security events in the region. However, there is scope to build on these activities if they are aligned with Canada's foreign policy.<sup>27</sup> Such a policy can support FOIP priorities, such as freedom to navigate international waterways. It could also see Canada broaden its support to human security-related development such as humanitarian assistance and disaster relief.

## CONCLUSION

This paper has argued that Canadian foreign policy in the Indo-Pacific region should seek to maintain the freedom to engage in both multilateral and bilateral dialogues. To maintain this freedom, Canada should avoid fully embracing the FOIP. Instead, it should dovetail its policy objectives with the aspects of the FOIP that support its regional priorities. To achieve this, Canada should strengthen multilateralism by using the consensus among the states that support the FOIP to address regional governance issues. In the trade domain, Canada should seek deeper trade alignments with states that show support for a rules-based economic order. Finally, Canada should continue to support its closest allies in the security domain by supporting human security operations and enforcing free use of international waterways.

However, these strategic options are far from a comprehensive solution, and further study is required to understand how Canada can integrate its strategic objectives within the FOIP concept. With the growing interconnectedness of the global economy, Canada must develop strategic options that harmonize its objectives in a global context rather than focusing on separate

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<sup>27</sup> Grinius, Marius. "Canada's Security Role in Asia-Pacific." Canadian Global Affairs Institute. July 2016, 2.

global regions. Further studies should investigate how such harmonization can be achieved. With major allies strongly supporting the FOIP, Canada has little choice but to consider how its global and regional strategic options fit within the FOIP concept.

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