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WHAT CAN CANADA DO? EXAMINING CANADA'S ROLE IN THE SOUTH CHINA SEA

By Lieutenant-Commander G.F. Atkinson

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Solo Flight

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WHAT CAN CANADA DO? EXAMINING CANADA'S ROLE IN THE SOUTH CHINA SEA

INTRODUCTION

Canada is a nation separated from the South China Sea (SCS) by the Pacific Ocean and approximately 6,000 nautical miles. Unlike Canada's commitment to NATO in Eastern Europe and the Mediterranean and its participation in Combined Maritime Forces' maritime security operations outside the Arabian Gulf, Canada is not committed to offering any military support individually or in any multinational coalition in the SCS in support of Canadian interests. Additionally, Canada has no territorial claim in the region and is facing no direct threat from countries within the SCS region. However, Canadian security has a wider definition that just defence issues; economic security and climate/environmental security are interests that affect Canadians and should be addressed as part of a broader national security strategy that looks beyond military-linked defence matters.

China's continued bully tactics and disregard for international laws threaten the wider definition of Canadian security. Canada has economic interests tied to a free and open SCS, and China's contempt for rules-based order and negative environmental impacts threaten Canada's mandate to strengthen global peace and security operations and promote the rule of law. Canada has a stake in the problem, but how can it contribute to the solution?

This solo flight paper intends to break down Canadian policy towards the SCS, identify what's at stake for Canada regarding China's actions, and finally offer solution spaces on how Canada can proceed to address this situation and secure Canadian interests at home and abroad.

Current State of Affairs in the SCS

It's complex. The SCS is a geo-political hot-spot, consisting of some of the world's most vital shipping routes through which approximately one third of global shipping passes.¹ The SCS is home to an abundance of natural resources, including fishing grounds and energy resources; oil reserves are estimated to be at least seven billion barrels and 900 trillion of cubic feet of natural gas.² Finally, the SCS is the site of multiple and overlapping territorial claims, political and military posturing, and a renewed major power competition.

Maritime claims have been made by Brunei, China, Malaysia, the Philippines, Taiwan, and Vietnam. China, who has the largest economy and military of these nations, has made by far the most expansive claim, "asserting ownership of more than 80 percent of the sea on largely historical grounds through its so-called Nine-Dash-Line, which encompasses most of the South China Sea."³

The most influential and aggressive player in the SCS is the People's Republic of China. For China, SCS represents an economic and strategic body of water in which they seek to control. Strategically, control of the sea is crucial in furthering China's foreign policy, the Belt and Road initiative. The SCS is the "gateway for the maritime silk road,"⁴ which links maritime trade routes from East Asia to Europe. Militarily, "China has runways and dozens of hangars for fighter aircraft on a handful of islands, as well as anti-ship cruise missiles, anti-aircraft batteries

¹ "How Much Trade Transits the South China Sea?," China Power – CSIS, accessed May 2, 2021, <https://chinapower.csis.org/much-trade-transits-south-china-sea/>.

² Beina Xu, "South China Sea Tensions," *Council on Foreign Relations*, May 14, 2014. <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/south-china-sea-tensions>.

³ Ifran Yar, "Why Should Canada Care About the South China Sea?," *MacDonald-Laurier Institute Publication*, April 9, 2019, <https://www.macdonaldlaurier.ca/canada-care-south-china-sea-irfan-yar-inside-policy/>.

⁴ Alexander Neill, "South China Sea: What's China's plan for its 'Great Wall of Sand'," *BBC News*, July 14, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-53344449>.

and missile defenses.⁵ Additionally, the SCS presents the most direct route to the Pacific Ocean for its ballistic nuclear submarines based at Hainan Island; this leads some to speculate that control of the SCS could become a safe haven for Chinese submarines and a critical nuclear deterrent and second-strike capability against the U.S.⁶

The SCS presents a potentially volatile region of the world that could affect regional and global economies, security, and policies.

Canada's policy and how is it being applied

One of Canada's stated foreign policy mandates is the revitalizing of the rules-based international order, specifically "Global Affairs Canada will continue to engage constructively with regional, bilateral and multilateral partners in driving positive action on global issues such as strengthening global peace and security operations, promoting the rule of law..."⁷ However, the Canadian position at present appears to be nothing more than lip service. To date, Canada—and the western world for that matter—have made very little to no progress in driving action to stop illegal Chinese expansion within the SCS. As a dialogue member of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), Canada is involved in high-level exchanges at summit meetings and ministerial meetings. At the 12th annual Conference on the SCS in November 2020, Canadian defence minister Harjit Sajjan re-iterated Canada's stance to pursue peace through multilateralism and support of the rules-based international order. Unfortunately continued statements such as defence minister Sajjan's ring hollow because before and after that

⁵ David Geaney, "China's island fortifications are a challenge to international norms," *Defense News*, April 17, 2020, <https://www.defensenews.com/opinion/commentary/2020/04/17/chinas-island-fortifications-are-a-challenge-to-international-norms/>.

⁶ Alexander Neill, "The submarines and rivalries underneath the South China Sea," *BBC News*, July 11, 2016, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-36574590>.

⁷ "Mandate: Global Affairs Canada," Global Affairs Canada, accessed May 2, 2021, <https://www.international.gc.ca/global-affairs-affaires-mondiales/corporate-ministere/mandate-mandat/index.aspx?lang=eng>.

declaration, Canada has not taken a leadership role in or provided much in the way of tangible support to the ongoing dispute in the SCS. In fact, Canada's policy regarding the SCS has received negative public feedback; Canada's policy has been referred to as "relatively muted"⁸, "turning a blind eye"⁹, and when conducting diplomatic and strategic engagements with East Asia, "erratic."¹⁰

Canada's most recent naval deployments to that part of the world has added more confusion on the government's willingness to set and enforce a clear policy regarding the SCS. In September 2019, HMCS Ottawa transited through the contested Taiwan Strait. At the time, a Canadian Joint Operations Command (CJOC) representative was cautious not to make any inflammatory statements, noting that "The Royal Canadian Navy does not conduct so-called freedom of navigation operations aimed at challenging the territorial claims of other nations."¹¹ This was clearly an attempt to distance the Royal Canadian Navy from how the U.S. Navy refers to its operations in the SCS. However, a 2021 CBC news report references two statements regarding the HMCS Ottawa deployment, which adds more confusion to Canada's policy towards the SCS. It was reported that "Defence officials were told to keep quiet about the Ottawa's trip in September 2019, three months after Chinese fighter jets buzzed two other Canadian ships making the same voyage,"¹² and that government documents described HMCS Ottawa's action as, "demonstrated Canadian support for our closest partners and allies, regional

⁸ Ifran Yar, "Why Should Canada Care?"

⁹ Thanh Hai Ngo, "Canada Has a Stake in South China Sea Disputes," Senate of Canada, November 28, 2016, <https://sencanada.ca/en/sencaplus/opinion/canada-has-a-stake-in-south-china-sea-disputes/>.

¹⁰ Adam P. MacDonald, "Canada Must Be Prepared To Support Its Military Allies In The Pacific," *MacDonald-Laurier Institute Publication*, August 2017, https://macdonaldlaurier.ca/files/pdf/MLICommentary_MacDonald_AugustF_Web.pdf.

¹¹ Coyne, "Another Canadian Warship."

¹² The Canadian Press, "Canadian warship transits South China Sea as diplomatic tensions remain high," *CBC News*, March 31, 2021, <https://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/hmcs-calgary-china-sea-transit-1.5972098>.

security and the rules-based international order.”¹³ If Canada’s position was to avoid tensions, then why attempt further provocation with HMCS Ottawa after eliciting a Chinese response just three months prior? On the other hand, if Canada’s transit in international waters was meant to show support to our closest partners and allies, why would the department reportedly muzzle defence officials on releasing this information?

The following year in October 2020, HMCS Winnipeg transited the Taiwan Strait. When referring the deployment, Deputy Defence Minister Jody Thomas was quoted as saying “[the deployments] are about the rules-based order and freedom of navigation, the freedom of the seas and the fact we will not be bullied into changing the geography of the world.”¹⁴ Her language is a stark departure to the way the previous deployment was described. In fact, her use of “freedom of navigation” is the exact type of wording purposefully avoided by CJOC in 2019.

Most recently in March 2021, HMCS Calgary sailed through the SCS and passed near China-Philippines contested Spratly Islands. CBC News reported on HMCS Calgary’s actions and cited a defence official noted that “sailing through the South China Sea was the most practical route for the warship.”¹⁵ The article also noted that “Canadian officials have previously denied trying to send any message when warships have passed through waters claimed by China.”¹⁶ In this instance, Canada appears to have returned to its original position, which more or less aligns with how it described its position towards the SCS in the defence policy. Released in 2017, *Strong, Secure, Engaged* recognized the growing concern with state competition in the SCS and that “Activities in the South China Sea highlight the need for all states in the region to

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Robert Fife and Steven Chase, “Top defence official says China is a threat to Canadian Arctic,” *The Globe and Mail*, March 11, 2021, <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/politics/article-top-defence-official-says-china-is-a-threat-to-canadian-arctic/>.

¹⁵ Coyne, “Another Canadian Warship.”

¹⁶ Ibid.

peacefully manage and resolve disputes in accordance with international law, and avoid coercion and other actions that could escalate tension.”¹⁷

Minister Sajjan appeared in April 2021 before the House of Commons special committee on China where he was critical of Chinese build up in disputed waters. He was slightly more forceful in his language, but essentially stayed on-brand. He said, "Canada opposes land reclamation projects and building outposts in disputed areas for military purposes," as well as reaffirming Canada's position towards continued support of partners against unilateral Chinese action.¹⁸

Canadian Armed Forces representatives and departmental leaders have sent conflicting signals regarding Canada's policy towards the SCS, but fundamentally Canada promotes a peaceful solution to the dispute in the SCS. Unfortunately the policy and its application has been mostly unsubstantial. In 2016, the Conference of Defence Associations Institute published a two-part article about why Canada needs to speak out on the SCS. Although the article was published three years prior to HMCS Ottawa's transit and five years prior to Calgary's transit, their take on Canada's SCS policy at that time holds true today. "Canada's current policy of silence highlights its clear lack of a well thought-out regional strategy, both for improving its economic and security ties with emerging markets in the region, and for responding to China's rise in particular.”¹⁹

¹⁷ Canada. Department of National Defence. *Strong, Secure, Engaged: Canada's Defence Policy*. Ottawa: Department of National Defence, 2017, 50. <http://dgpapp.forces.gc.ca/en/canada-defence-policy/docs/canada-defence-policy-report.pdf>.

¹⁸ Lee Berthiaume, "Sajjan targets Chinese claims in South China Sea, battles Tories over Beijing ties," *CTV News*, April 12, 2021, <https://www.ctvnews.ca/politics/sajjan-targets-chinese-claims-in-south-china-sea-battles-tories-over-beijing-ties-1.5384997>.

¹⁹ David A. Beitelman, "Breaking The Silence: Why Canada Needs To Speak Out On The South China Sea – Part 2," *Conference of Defence Associations Institute*, July 8, 2016, <https://cdainstitute.ca/breaking-the-silence-why-canada-needs-to-speak-out-on-the-south-china-sea-part-2/>.

So, we know the policy. Now what's at stake for Canada?

Canada's stake in the SCS is two-fold: Economically related to maritime trade and security related to rules-based order and the Arctic.

Regarding trade, a voice in de-escalation of tension supports Canadian trade interests. At present, no nation who claims a stake in the SCS is threatening to impede maritime traffic, but “armed conflict in the South China Sea would have that effect, with immediate economic consequences that would not spare Canada.”²⁰ Statistics Canada reported that China was Canada's largest non-U.S. trading partner in 2020, accounting for approximately 5% of all Canadian exports (U.S. is 75%) and 14% of all Canadian imports (U.S. is 49%).²¹ Although method of import/export was not available for 2020, a Statistics Canada report from 2015 noted that 90% of all Chinese imports of Canadian origin goods imported from Canada were by water and 67% of all Canadian imports of Chinese origin goods imported from China were by water (23% arrived to Canada via U.S. road move)²² The statistics demonstrate that the majority of imports/exports from Canada's second largest trading partner are moved by sea. Additionally, neighboring SCS states like the Philippines, Vietnam, Malaysia, and Taiwan represent approximately 3% more of Canada's imports and about 1% exports.²³ The Centre for Strategic and International Studies – China Project suggests that short-term disruptions to the sea lines of communication to the SCS would not cause a global economic halt, but would increase costs.²⁴

²⁰ Gordon Houldon, “Opinion: Why the South China Sea Decision Matters to Canada,” *Edmonton Journal*, July 15, 2016, <https://edmontonjournal.com/opinion/columnists/opinion-why-the-south-china-sea-decision-matters-to-canada>.

²¹ “The International Trade Explorer, 2020,” Statistics Canada, accessed May 1, 2021, <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/71-607-x/71-607-x2019005-eng.htm>.

²² “Comparing Canada's and China's bilateral trade data,” Statistics Canada, accessed May 1, 2021, <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/13-605-x/2018001/article/54962-eng.htm>.

²³ “International Trade Explorer”.

²⁴ “How Much Trade?” China Power – CSIS.

Longer-term closures and re-routing of maritime traffic could cause “globally-reaching supply chain disruptions”²⁵ which would negatively affect Canada.

While China flaunts international law in the SCS, Canada needs to look no further than its own north and ask the same question posed by Canadian Senator Ngo in his position paper to the Canadian Senate: “If China consolidates its position in the South China Sea through intimidation and by disregarding international law, how can Canadians be confident this couldn’t also happen in the Arctic?”²⁶ In China’s 2018 Arctic policy, they declare themselves a near-Arctic nation and reference how the current Belt and Road Initiative will facilitate a “Polar Silk Road”.²⁷ China completed its first Arctic expedition in September 2019 with its first home-built icebreaker.²⁸ This demonstrates that China possesses the capability now and likely into the future to exert influence and maintain presence in the Arctic.

Does Canada’s contribution meet the equity of the problem?

Given the potential consequences of China’s military build-up and unchecked maritime control in the SCS, it is fair to say that Canada’s contribution is not meeting its equity in the problem. In Canada’s defence, like-minded western countries have made similar progress in containing Chinese expansion, although some states have more stake in the region than others. Regardless, it is questionable whether a more concerted Canadian effort would have yielded different results. Canada is at best a middle power, or perhaps in search of a middle-power role

²⁵ Ibid

²⁶ Ngo, “Stake”.

²⁷ Lyle J. Goldstein, “China Is Building Nuclear Icebreakers To Seek Out A “Polar Silk Road”,” *The National Interest*, March 16, 2020, <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/buzz/china-building-nuclear-icebreakers-seek-out-polar-silk-road-132417>.

²⁸ Atle Staalesen, “China’s new icebreaker completes first Arctic expedition,” *The Barents Observer*, September 29, 2020, <https://thebarentsobserver.com/en/arctic/2020/09/chinas-new-icebreaker-completes-first-arctic-mission>.

in a new world order of great power rivalries.²⁹ What is clear is that Canada alone has very little to no influence over Chinese affairs; look no further than the December 2018 arrest and continued incarceration of Michael Kovrig and Michael Spavor, whose arrest is widely believed to be a retaliation for Canada's arrest of Huawei Technologies Co. Ltd. executive Meng Wanzhou.³⁰ Although Canada has a stake in the SCS, it does not alone possess the power and influence to affect change; the only way for Canada to ensure that its own interests are addressed is through strength in numbers and mutual support, which is essentially what Canada is doing anyway.

Option Space

To affect change in the region, Canada should continue to promote its core values and work multilaterally to quell the tension in the SCS. This strategy can be accomplished by either becoming more involved with partners in applying pressure in the region or by maintaining the status quo but remaining open to opportunities of direct involvement.

For Canada, there may be an opportunity to do more. The *Globe and Mail* is reporting that Canada is being urged to join the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue.³¹ The "Quad" as it is known in short form, was revived at the 2017 ASEAN Summits in Manila. The United States, Japan, India, and Australia had working groups on the side of the summit to discuss a "free and open Indo-Pacific"³² in which the South China Sea undoubtedly featured in the discussions.

²⁹ Eugene Lang, "Searching for a Middle-Power Role in a New World Order," *Canadian Global Affairs Institute*, June 2019. https://www.cgai.ca/searching_for_a_middle_power_role_in_a_new_world_order.

³⁰ Robert Fife, Steven Chase, and Nathan Vanderklippe, "Two Canadians jailed in China mark 500 days in confinement," *Globe and Mail*, April 23, 2020, <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/politics/article-two-canadians-jailed-in-china-mark-500-days-in-confinement/>.

³¹ Robert Fife and Steven Chase, "Canada urged to play bigger role with allies to counter China in the Indo-Pacific," *The Globe and Mail*, April 4, 2021, <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/politics/article-canada-urged-to-play-bigger-role-with-allies-to-contain-china-in-the/>.

³² Ankit Panda, "US, Japan, India, and Australia Hold Working-Level Quadrilateral Meeting on Regional Cooperation," *The Diplomat*, November 13, 2017, <https://thediplomat.com/2017/11/us-japan-india-and-australia-hold-working-level-quadrilateral-meeting-on-regional-cooperation/>.

Retired Vice-Admiral Mark Norman was quoted as saying on the topic, “So, yes, I am an advocate of working with those countries but we need to do it seriously. These are serious countries with serious issues and they are not interested in adding a flag to the photo op. They are looking for meaningful contribution.”³³ Joining the Quad may have the positive effect of keeping China in check while strengthening Canada’s relationships with other strategic partners like India (arguably more important than some of the other SCS players like Philippines or Vietnam). Moreover, establishing closer those ties to other Indo-Pacific partners like India may also reduce Canada’s own trade reliance to both China and the U.S. A move to a formal arrangement to express support to allies in the SCS would coincide with a push from European allies to increase their presence in the SCS. In March 2021, it was reported than France has increased its presence in the Indo-Pacific, as well as the United Kingdom and Germany are planning a deployment to the area in late 2021.³⁴ Increasing Canada’s role in the SCS would be a bolder move and a departure from current actions, although still within the bounds of Canadian foreign policy.

The second option is status quo—reinforce the current policy and commit to finding a peaceful resolution to the dispute in the SCS through international arbitration, but avoid taking steps that would escalate tensions. Taking a status-quo goalkeeping position enables strategic room to manoeuvre in the future, and Canada can increase its role more easily as opposed to going hard over early and then having to walk back. Canada is already participating in military exercises with regional partners. In 2019, HMCS *Regina* and MV *Asterix* participated in Exercise ‘KAEDEx’, a bilateral naval activity meant to improve interoperability and

³³ Fife and Chase, “Canada urged.”

³⁴ Aanchal Nigam, “France Aims To Join US In South China Sea Amid Tensions With Beijing: Report,” *Republicworld.com*, March 8, 2021, <https://www.republicworld.com/world-news/rest-of-the-world-news/france-aims-to-join-us-in-south-china-sea-amid-tensions-with-beijing-report.html>

familiarization between the RCN and Japanese Defence Force.³⁵ In late 2020, HMCS Winnipeg transited the Taiwan Strait and subsequently participated in Exercise KEEN SWORD.

Conducted on military installations throughout mainland Japan and their surrounding waters, KEEN SWORD is a multinational War at Sea exercise with the Japanese Defence Force and units from the United States Navy Reagan Carrier Strike Group. In addition to strengthening defence relationships with allied nations, Canada could also commit to some extent to “strengthen efforts to significantly reduce the environmental impacts of the disputes upon the fragile ecosystem of the South China Sea.”³⁶

A status quo option will only go so far as the states involved pursue those ends. If China continues land reclamation and militarization in the face of international norms, then the status quo becomes invalid. Canada needs to determine what the line is and what its response will be once that line is crossed.

CONCLUSION

As a trading nation and one committed to international peace and security, it is clear that Canada has a stake in the SCS. This is reflected in current policy and from various levels in government on how Canada wishes to pursue peaceful negotiations in the SCS. At present, Canada’s primary responses to the ongoing tension in the region include public messaging and limited and un-escalatory presence in the SCS. As the SCS has the potential for globally-reaching impact, Canada included, it can be argued that Canada’s current policy and actions

³⁵ Ridzwan Rahmat, “Canada, Japan navies enhance interoperability in South China Sea,” *Janes*, June 19, 2019, <https://www.janes.com/defence-news/news-detail/canada-japan-navies-enhance-interoperability-in-south-china-sea>.

³⁶ Thanh Hai Ngo, “Statement On The Adoption of the South China Sea Motion,” *Canadian Senate*, April 24, 2018, <https://senatorngo.ca/statement-on-the-adoption-of-the-south-china-sea-motion/>.

appear inconsistent to secure those interests. However, Canada has to balance what it wants to achieve against what it can achieve given its status and influence in global affairs.

Canada should at a minimum continue their current policy of promoting a peaceful resolution to the disputes in the SCS while assessing new opportunities to become a more involved player in the region, either through defensive partnerships, environmental support, and/or arbitration and negotiations. Regardless of which path Canada takes, political leaders need to ensure its policy goals are clearly defined, principally what outcome does Canada want to achieve and by what means is Canada willing to achieve it. The latter part of the policy goal is probably the most important because recent history shows that China is steadfast in expanding its borders and opportunities for growth in the face of strong opposition. Canada must be ready to face that challenge, if and when it comes.

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