



**Updating Canadian Policy for Maritime Conflict:
A Focus on the Threat Posed by China in the Indo-Pacific**

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JCSP 49 DL

Exercise Solo Flight

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UPDATING CANADIAN POLICY FOR MARITIME CONFLICT: A FOCUS ON THE THREAT POSED BY CHINA IN THE INDO-PACIFIC

For seven years following its release in 2017, Strong, Secure, Engaged (SSE) was Canada's primary reference for defence policy and announcement of new capabilities. SSE outlined defence objectives for the next two decades, focusing on "predicting future threats and adapting to emerging challenges" to promote both Canadian and international security.¹ To meet this intention, SSE committed \$62.3 billion of new funding over two decades to expand the capabilities of the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) and improve its ability to survive in a contested environment.² However, global challenges have changed significantly since SSE's publication, resulting in a more uncertain geopolitical environment.

Canada attempted to address these challenges by releasing a new defence policy in April 2024 titled "Our North, Strong and Free: A Renewed Vision for Canada's Defence". Similar to SSE, this new defence policy highlights the growing challenges within the global security environment, specifically the emergence of strategic competition over international norms and a renewed great power competition.³ The new policy pledges to invest an additional \$73 billion in national defence over the next two decades, bringing Canadian defence spending to 1.76% of GDP by 2029-30.⁴ However, the threats that existed seven years ago when Canada released SSE continue to expand in 2024, triggered by China's attempts to rebalance the world's geopolitical power structure.⁵ This rebalancing of global power is now the greatest threat to the existing rules based international order, with Chinese territorial claims in the Indo-Pacific significantly increasing the risk of war.⁶ As such, it can be argued that these aggressive acts will continue and Canada's biggest national security threat is now coming from the Pacific and China.⁷

For over 70 years, Canada and its allies (specifically the US) have dominated the Indo-Pacific, enjoying almost total freedom of movement.⁸ Yet, over the last 20 years, China has significantly enhanced its military capabilities to challenge this dominance,

¹ Geordie Jeakins. "SSE's Sequel: Critical Questions for Canada's Defence Policy Update". Canadian Global Affairs Institute (September 2022): 1

² Strong Secure Engaged: Canada's Defence Policy. Ottawa: Minister of National Defence, (2017): 43.

³ Our North, Strong and Free: A Renewed Vision for Canada's Defence. Ottawa: Minister of National Defence. (2024): vi

⁴ Ibid., 30.

⁵ Hon John McKay Chair. "Report of the Standing Committee on Defence", 44th Parliament 1st Session (June 2022): 5

⁶ SSE's Sequel: Critical Questions for Canada's Defence Policy Update, 2.

⁷ John McKay. "Report of the Standing Committee on National Defence". 44th Parliament, 1st Session, (June 2022): 54

⁸ Michael Beckley. "The Emerging Military Balance in East Asia: How China's Neighbors Can Check Chinese Naval Expansion". International Security; 42-2 (2017): 78.

specifically strengthening the capabilities of its navy. This buildup has accelerated under current leader Xi Jinping, with China becoming increasingly aggressive across the Indo-Pacific. This aggression includes expanding its maritime claims in the South China Sea and encroaching on the maritime boundaries of Canadian allies and security partners, including Vietnam, Taiwan and the Philippines.⁹ Based on China's actions over the last two decades, the prospect of war in the Indo-Pacific has shifted from the realm of hypothetical to an inevitability. This essay will argue that as part of a broader national security strategy, there is a need to incorporate additional elements into Canada's recently updated defence policy placing greater emphasis on naval capabilities and cooperation with regional allies. These changes are needed to address the maritime threat posed by China and prepare Canada for armed conflict.

Any war over territorial rights in the Indo-Pacific is likely to be a lengthy, global conflict with no clear end state.¹⁰ The encounter could expand to include Canada and its allies, as both sides seek strategies for success in a conflict that China and its authoritarian regime cannot afford to lose.¹¹ As it will likely be a global conflict, it would also present problems for diplomacy and present high risk of nuclear war.¹² If Canada neglects to prepare for this conflict and define its role now, it could face catastrophic results.

The initial step in preparing for conflict with China is to implement changes to Canada's recently updated defence policy "Our North, Strong and Free". This strategy illustrates Canada's commitment to national security, investment in new capabilities and stable funding.¹³ While Canada has traditionally maintained a focus on European diplomacy and security through NATO, the changing geopolitical dynamic demands an unambiguous approach to diplomacy that considers the rising threat of China and includes a defence policy that fully articulates the threat of war.¹⁴ Thus, Canada's defence policy should undergo adjustments that highlight China as the key adversary and shifts strategic focus to the Pacific, while also highlighting non-traditional strategic partnerships and enhanced naval capabilities. These changes are needed to effectively address the evolving global landscape, specifically the potential for war with China in the Pacific.

An important element that was lacking in SSE but was added to "Our North, Strong and Free" is the commitment to update Canadian defence policy every four years.¹⁵ This is essential as it allows Canada to maintain a flexible defence posture, with

⁹ Andrew F. Krepinevich, Jr. "The Big One: Preparing for a Long War With China". Foreign Affairs (December 2023).

¹⁰ Hal Brands, Michael Beckley. "Getting Ready for a Long War: Why a US-China Fight in the Western Pacific Won't End Quickly". American Enterprise Institute, 2024.

¹¹ Doug Bandow. "What Would a War with China Look Like?". CATO Institute. October 2022.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Our North, Strong and Free: A Renewed Vision for Canada's Defence, iv.

¹⁴ SSE's Sequel: Critical Questions for Canada's Defence Policy Update, 2.

¹⁵ Our North, Strong and Free: A Renewed Vision for Canada's Defence, 15

the ability to evaluate improvements and make amendments if required.¹⁶ With a rapidly changing geopolitical environment, Canadian defence policy runs the risk of becoming outdated quickly due to the infrequency of updates.¹⁷ More frequent reviews enables Canada to make informed decisions, acquire the right capabilities, and remain ready to mitigate the risk of existing and emerging threats.¹⁸ Additionally, frequent updates allows Canada to quickly respond to changes in the geopolitical situation, specifically a more aggressive China in the Indo-Pacific.

With frequent updates to Canadian defence policy established as a requirement, a critical element to examine is what should be added to “Our North, Strong and Free” to address the potential for war with China. While the document acknowledges a continuing great-power competition, it is vital that additions be more direct in addressing the threat posed by China and the potential for armed conflict.¹⁹ Although China is mentioned 17 times in ‘Our North Strong and Free’, it speaks mainly to China’s ambitious military buildup and uses language surrounding the need for frank, open and respectful dialogue to ensure clarity of Canada’s positions.²⁰ Furthermore, it highlights China’s continued relationship with Russia and the threat that it poses to Canada and the world.²¹ However, the language is not effective in articulating the emerging threat posed by China to Canada’s national security and the risks for regional conflict.

Additionally, further injects into Canada’s new defence policy must prioritize a strategic shift to the Pacific, recognizing the importance of strategic partnerships beyond traditional alliances. Strengthening ties with other nations in the Indo-Pacific, such as Vietnam, Australia, New Zealand, Japan, and South Korea, would contribute to a more comprehensive and effective defence posture and better mitigate risks associated with Chinese aggression and potential war.²²

The importance of regional partnerships was emphasized by the US in its National Defense Strategy (NDS) published in October 2022. This document states: “China is attempting to destabilize US alliances and security partnerships in the Indo-Pacific and leverage its economic influence and military strength to coerce its neighbors and threaten US allies”.²³ To combat Chinese attempts at destabilization, the current US administration is promoting the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) grouping of itself, Australia, India and Japan. Furthermore, the US is attempting to formalize this group and increase

¹⁶ Ibid., 15.

¹⁷ Report of the Standing Committee on Defence, 44th Parliament 1st Session, 45

¹⁸ Ibid., 58

¹⁹ SSE’s Sequel: Critical Questions for Canada’s Defence Policy Update, 2.

²⁰ Our North, Strong and Free: A Renewed Vision for Canada’s Defence, 8.

²¹ Our North, Strong and Free: A Renewed Vision for Canada’s Defence, 7.

²² Eric Lerhe. “How Can Canada Best Defend its Security Interests in the Indo-Pacific?” Canadian Global Affairs Institute, (July 2021): 3.

²³ U.S. Department of Defence. “National Defence Strategy.” (2022): 4.

its membership, although it continues to downplay direct links to NATO.²⁴ Since SSE was released, Canada has increased naval deployments to the Indo-Pacific and has discussed the potential of becoming a Quad participant. However, membership in this group should be formalized and highlighted in Canadian defence policy, similar to Canada's membership in NATO (which is referenced 50 times in "Our North, Strong and Free"). Membership in this group involves joint naval exercises, information-sharing agreements and cooperative efforts to enhance maritime security.²⁵ Clear language within the policy emphasizing Canada's commitment to collective defence in the Pacific (through joining the Quad grouping) would underscore its willingness to assist allies in times of need.

Any decision by Canada to further align its defence policy with that of the US in the Pacific could lead to retaliation from China. One measure that would mitigate the associated risk is for Canada to enhance its economic, diplomatic and military ties with other Pacific nations, specifically those who are also concerned with China's growing influence in the region.²⁶ Two logical choices would be Japan and Australia, who are both members of the Quad grouping. Through augmenting its military engagements with these partners, either through joining the Quad group or establishing defence pacts and formal alliances, Canada would contribute to countering China's desire to alter economic conditions and regional security.²⁷ The appropriate step to realize this new policy for Canada would be to formally request inclusion into the Quad grouping along with other democratic middle powers including New Zealand and South Korea. As a member of a Pacific alliance like NATO, Canada would benefit from enhanced interoperability and modernization of its naval forces, putting it in a better position to confront Chinese aggression and territorial ambitions.²⁸

In addition to broader diplomatic and foreign policy references, a targeted enhancement of naval capabilities should be the foundation of Canadian defence policy. This should include investments in naval assets, including warships, submarines, and maritime surveillance systems. Prioritizing the modernization of the RCN would contribute to regional stability and bolster Canada's ability to participate in joint naval operations with allies (Quad group) through enhanced interoperability.²⁹ Upgrading existing fleets and acquiring modern technologies would align with the evolving maritime threats in the Pacific. To execute this strategy, a comprehensive review of how a Pacific

²⁴ How Can Canada Best Defend its Security Interests in the Indo-Pacific?, 3.

²⁵ Ibid., 4.

²⁶ Kenneth Holland, "Canada and the Indo-Pacific Strategy". *Foreign Policy Journal*, 27:2 (March 2021): 239.

²⁷ Adam MacDonald, Carter Vance. "Developing a Canadian Indo-Pacific geopolitical orientation". *International Journal*, Vol 76 (4) (2022): 579.

²⁸ Canada and the Indo-Pacific Strategy., 243.

²⁹ Ibid., 243.

war with China would be fought must be conducted and Canada's role in that war must be defined. Once this is completed, additional capabilities required for Canadian defence policy can be identified.

It is apparent that war in the Pacific would focus on sea power. Sea power can be described as the capacity to operate in the world's marine environments to meet military/commercial objectives and to prevent adversaries from having similar freedom of movement.³⁰ Based on this definition, a key Chinese strategy will be to utilize anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) tactics. Crucial elements within this strategy are preventing the US from assisting allies at the onset of any conflict and reducing the possibility of allied navies having freedom of navigation and sea control in the Indo-Pacific region.³¹ There are several ways that China is employing military modernization in an attempt to deny sea control to the US and its allies.

The first way China is restricting access in the Pacific is through constructing and arming artificial islands in the South China Sea. China has armed three islands in contested areas in the Pacific, deploying anti-ship and anti-aircraft missiles, jamming equipment and aircraft.³² This is part of a broader Chinese A2/AD strategy to capitalize on its advantages by developing and deploying shore-based missile batteries, small warships, and aircraft armed with anti-ship missiles and torpedoes.³³ Accordingly, any military force attempting to enter the South China Sea will encounter forces capable of denying it command of the air and sea. An additional way China is building its A2/AD capability is through the modernization of its navy, specifically its submarine force. Submarines are a crucial component of China's A2/AD strategy, as they can gather intelligence and play an important role in deterrence, as other nations know of their existence and must plan accordingly.³⁴ Thus, based on available evidence, Western military planners deduced that China was concentrating on submarines as an effective A2/AD strategy, which facilitates the necessity of an effective anti-submarine strategy.³⁵

A further consideration for China regarding its approach to war in the Pacific is connected to its geographical advantages and the scale of the Pacific Ocean. Any US led force (which would include Canada) attempting to operate in the Pacific will have limited success without sufficient stores, spare parts, fuel and ammunition. This fact is known by

³⁰ Daniel Silva. "The role of sea power in China's rise: Is maritime conflict inevitable?" *Análise Social*, 4 (217) (December 2015): 711.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 719.

³² The Guardian. "China has fully militarized three islands in South China Sea, US admiral says". Last Updated 21 Mar 2022. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/mar/21/china-has-fully-militarized-three-islands-in-south-china-sea-us-admiral-says>

³³ "The Emerging Military Balance in East Asia: How China's Neighbors Can Check Chinese Naval Expansion" 99.

³⁴ "The role of sea power in China's rise: Is maritime conflict inevitable?", 719.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 719.

China and it is expected that it will attack allied logistics fleets, making them a targeting priority.³⁶ This will lead to contested logistics areas, causing in theatre resupply to become extremely difficult and dangerous. Since logistics will be the hub of all force projection for any conflict in the Pacific, it will thus be Canada's (and allies) center of gravity.³⁷ Attacking supply ships, as well as tanker and transport aircraft, will drive Chinese military actions and doctrine, which envisions fighting a stronger foe that is operating far from home.³⁸ If China were to successfully neutralize allied resupply capabilities, it could win the war without entering into a major battle with the US and allies.

Thus, to defend against China's A2/AD strategy, there are certain capabilities that the RCN must possess that are lacking in the current Canadian defence policy. As such, the first capability the CAF requires to operate effectively during a war in the Pacific is a long-range strike capability. This capability would be required on naval assets and would allow the RCN to eliminate Chinese anti-ship missile threats and allow it to operate more freely in the contested waters of the Pacific.³⁹ Long range missiles can launch attacks from outside the A2/AD threat areas and reduce the effectiveness of fixed Chinese defences. This would eliminate China's first strike capability and allow naval assets to operate more freely.⁴⁰ Having a long-range missile capability could target fixed Chinese ballistic missile launchers, including those on ships and artificial islands. Although "Our North, Strong and Free" highlights the acquisition of long-range missile capabilities for the Army, given the maritime nature of a war with China it is imperative that this capability is resident within the RCN. This is not currently articulated in the updated policy, as it only speaks to "exploring the options" of long-range missiles for the navy.⁴¹ As such, this is a critical capability and should be included as a key element within an updated Canadian defence policy.

Additionally, with a key component of China's A2/AD strategy being the use of submarines, Canada should focus on its anti-submarine warfare (ASW) capabilities. During the Cold War, Canada was a leader in ASW and in developing submarine tracking technology, with NATO countries turning to Canada for insight on equipment and ASW tactics.⁴² This changed post 2001, when the focus of the RCN shifted to different

³⁶ Warrior Maven: Center for Military Modernization. "How China Would Try to Win a War Against the US in the Pacific". Last Updated 10 Jun 2023. <https://warriormaven.com/china/how-china-would-try-to-win-a-war-against-the-us-in-the-pacific>

³⁷ Ibid.,

³⁸ Ibid.,

³⁹ Sugio Takahashi. "Counter A2/AD in Japan-U.S. Defense Cooperation: Toward Allied Air-Sea-Battle". Project 2049 Institute. (April 2012): 16.

⁴⁰ Ibid.,. 16.

⁴¹ Our North, Strong and Free: A Renewed Vision for Canada's Defence, 27.

⁴² Elena Pankova. "Reclaiming Canada's reputation in anti-submarine warfare". Vanguard. Last updated January 2015. <https://vanguardcanada.com/reclaiming-canadas-reputation-anti-submarine-warfare/>

maritime security missions.⁴³ By investing in technological advancements and upgrading its current anti-submarine equipment, Canada could provide significant defensive capabilities and strategic warning systems for Canadian allies during a war in the Pacific. With an ability to neutralize Chinese submarines, Canada could open the sea lines of communication and significantly reduce China's A2/AD capabilities.⁴⁴ This would assist with freedom of navigation and sea control and limit China's ability to attack logistics targets. A comprehensive approach to maritime defence would necessitate the development of upgraded ASW.

ASW is an area that is lacking in "Our North, Strong and Free". Submarines are mentioned ten times in the document but mostly in the broader context of the threat they pose vice a capability requirement. It highlights the importance of submarines to detect and deter maritime threats, but only commits to "exploring options" for expanding Canada's submarine fleet.⁴⁵ It also highlights the acquisition of maritime sensors that can be fitted on Arctic Offshore Patrol Vessels (AOPV).⁴⁶ This highlights the fact that Canadian policy is focused more on the threats in the Arctic (primarily Russia) rather than detecting Chinese submarines in the Pacific. In order to operate effectively in the Pacific, the RCN must be able to track and engage submarines. This should be articulated in Canadian defence policy and highlighted as a significant capability gap.

With Canada's potential role in Pacific alliances and subsequent capability requirements better defined, how can Canadian defence policy be better developed to help it execute its expected mission? The answer lies in a direct synchronization with Canadian national security strategy and a shift in Canadian strategic focus to the Pacific. Following closer examination, it becomes evident that Canada's foreign affairs and national defence policies have been disconnected for at least two decades. This has led to an inability to think strategically and gives the impression that Canada does not take foreign policy and national defence seriously.⁴⁷ The disconnect between Canada's foreign policy and defence policy is impacting its relationship with allies, and Canada has fallen in importance internationally, as it is deemed to rely too much on allies for collective defence.⁴⁸

As such, in addition to strengthening relationships with current allies and fostering those with non-traditional countries, Canada can make progress within the diplomatic realm by ensuring updated defence policies are completed and synchronized with national

⁴³ Ibid.,

⁴⁴ "Counter A2/AD in Japan-U.S. Defense Cooperation: Toward Allied Air-Sea-Battle", 18.

⁴⁵ Our North, Strong and Free: A Renewed Vision for Canada's Defence, 24.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 25.

⁴⁷ Report of the Standing Committee on Defence, 44th Parliament 1st Session, 45

⁴⁸ Ibid., 45.

security policy.⁴⁹ Canada has not released a national security statement in almost 20 years. A thorough public review will raise awareness among Canadians, identify the capabilities required to execute priorities, and establish governance and transparency.⁵⁰ This means that defence policy updates should not be completed in isolation, and should be drafted with a goal to support foreign policy. Canada must develop strategies to mitigate the hostile activities of state actors, and CAF capabilities play an integral role.⁵¹ A national security strategy will identify threats and set priorities, and the defence policy will identify requirements and capabilities to meet those priorities. This is why these two policies must be drafted in consultation with each other.

A critical way that Canada can link its national security policy with defence policy is through formalizing a strategic shift to the Pacific. To date, governments have not provided Maritime Forces Pacific (MARPAF) with the requisite number of frigates and supply ships to effectively operate in the Pacific. These assets remain primarily in Halifax as Canada continues to prioritize Russia as the primary threat and NATO as the mitigation strategy.⁵² As war with China approaches, Canada must move away from its longstanding tradition of focussing primarily on deterring Russia. A solution would be to redistribute ships to the Pacific, with at least one frigate being transferred to the West coast.⁵³ Additionally with two supply ships (*Protecteur* Class) expected to be operational within the next few years, having both supply ships on the West coast would enable Canada to effectively support operations in the Indo-Pacific, for its own units and those of its allies.⁵⁴ It is critical that this shift to the Pacific be formalized in a security policy that allows defence policy to follow suit and shift resources and capabilities West. This would enable Canada to be prepared for upcoming conflict in the Indo-Pacific by augmenting MARPAF's current capabilities. This shift to the Pacific is not mentioned in Canada's updated defence policy and is an important requirement that should be included if Canada is serious about prioritizing national security beyond the current news cycle and next election.⁵⁵

This paper has demonstrated that even though Canada updated its defence policy in April 2024, there are significant gaps that must be addressed if it wants to be prepared for armed conflict in the Indo-Pacific. By highlighting the importance of international collaborations and synchronizing national security and defence policy, it has outlined the

⁴⁹ Vincent Rigby, Thomas Juneau. "Canada Urgently Needs to Rethink Its National Security Strategy". Centre for Strategic and International Studies, Last updated May 2022.

<https://www.csis.org/analysis/canada-urgently-needs-rethink-its-national-security-strategy>

⁵⁰ Ibid.,.

⁵¹ Ibid.,.

⁵² "How Can Canada Best Defend its Security Interests in the Indo-Pacific?", 1.

⁵³ Ibid., 3.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 3.

⁵⁵ "Canada Urgently Needs to Rethink Its National Security Strategy". Last updated May 2022.

<https://www.csis.org/analysis/canada-urgently-needs-rethink-its-national-security-strategy>

ways Canada can enhance its readiness despite the evolving threats posed by China. These enhancements will contribute to a comprehensive defence posture, aligning current policy with the central goal of ensuring the CAF is prepared to defend Canadian interests. If Canada is serious about stability in the Indo-Pacific, it must support current allies and foster new relationships with non-traditional ones to maximize efforts against Chinese aggression.⁵⁶

This paper has further demonstrated through an analysis of China's key A2/AD strategy that there are currently capability gaps resident within the CAF and specifically the RCN that must be addressed. These gaps include long range strike capability and the ability to track and defeat Chinese submarines. Additionally, it has argued that Canadian defence policy must formally identify and commit to acquiring the capabilities required by the RCN to deter China. To further support this, Canada must shift its focus toward the Pacific and continue its military capability upgrades described in both SSE and "Our North, Strong and Free". If these efforts are properly coordinated with allies, the deterrence and capability impacts will aid Canada in preparing for the inevitable war in the Pacific.⁵⁷

⁵⁶ How Can Canada Best Defend its Security Interests in the Indo-Pacific?, 5

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 5.

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