



## INDO-ASIA-PACIFIC

# CANADA'S RECENT NAVAL DEPLOYMENTS AND POWER PROJECTION ACROSS THE PACIFIC AND BEYOND

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*By David Scott*

Canada has been conducting annual Pacific deployments of strategic import, including *Westploy* in 2016, *Operation Poseidon Cutlass* in 2017, and *Operation Projection* since 2018. These deployments highlight increasing Canadian naval presence and naval exercising with other China-concerned partners in the region. The particularly successful *Operation Projection* of 2022 has complemented Canada's recently-released *Indo-Pacific Strategy* and its maritime provisions for the future.

Canada's deployments use five *Halifax*-class frigates based at Maritime Forces Pacific headquartered at Esquimalt, British Columbia. Commissioned in the 1990s and later modernized in the 2010s, these general-purpose warships are mission tailored for anti-submarine warfare. Their deployments schedule is listed below:

- 2016: HMCS *Vancouver*, August–December
- 2017: HMCS *Winnipeg* and *Ottawa*, March–August
- 2018: HMCS *Vancouver*, April–August  
HMCS *Calgary*, August–December
- 2019: HMCS *Regina*, February–August  
HMCS *Ottawa*, August–December
- 2020: HMCS *Winnipeg*, September–December
- 2021: HMCS *Calgary*, February–September
- 2022: HMCS *Vancouver* and HMCS *Winnipeg*, August–December

In addition, three Victoria-class hunter-killer submarines (HMCSs *Victoria*, *Corner Brook*, and *Chicoutimi*) are also based at Esquimalt. The ships are of 1990's provenance and not far off end of service, with troubled maintenance issues during the last decade. However, extension of service could be extended into the 2030s under the *Victoria*-Class Modernization Project. By nature, submarine deployments are secretive, literally below the waves.

## Purpose

*Westploy*'s regional context is identified in the [Canadian Navy](#) release in 2016 of [Leadmark 2050: Canada in a New Maritime World](#). The document emphasized the “growing importance of the Indian Ocean,” and presciently stated, “the geopolitics of the Indian Ocean is likely to be exceeded only by the geopolitics of the Asia-Pacific” (p. 6). The document states that Canada needs to “project Canadian power to shape, and when necessary, restore order to the global system” (p. 12) through “a blue water navy, globally deployable and forward postured” (p. 57). Whether such Canadian assets on their own were enough to restore order is a moot question.

The [Defence Department](#) announcement for *Operation Poseidon Cutlass* in 2017 stated, “this near six-month deployment of multiple warships signals the strategic im-

portance of the Indo-Asia Pacific region to Canada and reinforces Canada's commitment to the maintenance of regional peace and security" in that region. This indicated a shift from previous strategic terminology of the "Asia-Pacific" and brought in India and the Indian Ocean. The result in a general sense sought to "foster friendships, and ultimately trust," which raises the questions of with whom and about whom?

A key rationale was presence: "importantly, warship deployments such as this also place *sea-based capability 'in-region,'* where it can provide options for the Government of Canada should a timely Canadian response be necessary." This begs the question of responding to whom? [Jeff Hutchinson](#), Commanding Officer of HMCS *Winnipeg* was "enthusiastic about the Royal Canadian Navy's '*generate forward*' concept" and "the opportunity for HMCSs *Winnipeg* and *Ottawa* to strengthen our partnerships with Indo-Asia Pacific nations." This raised the question of which naval partnerships Canada was strengthening, once again in resonance with the question of with whom and where?

As Canada's *Operation Projection* commenced in 2018, the Canadian [Defence Department](#) used similar rationales, "these deployments are tangible proof of Canada's determination to have a *persistent maritime presence*, and to enhance Canada's network of defense partnerships in the region." [Tony Williams](#), the Public Affairs Officer of HMCS *Vancouver* stated, "the mission will also demonstrate the Canadian Armed Force's ability to *project naval influence*." The rhetoric surrounding the 2022 *Operation Projection* was pointed. General [Wayne Eyre](#), Chief of Defence Staff announced that the deployment "is a visible display of our continued commitment toward protecting regional security and maintaining a free, open, and inclusive Indo-Pacific." [Anita Anand](#) the Minister of National Defence stressed "the importance of the Indo-Pacific region to global stability and prosperity" whereby "through contributions like *Operation Projection* and *Operation Neon*, Canada will continue to work with allies and partners to bolster the rules-based international order in the region."

## Exercises

Pacific deployment patterns demonstrate modest Canadian unilateral outreach but exercising with other powers demonstrates some significant security convergences. Canada has participated in the U.S. led *Rim of the Pacific (RIMPAC)* biannual exercises

ever since they started in 1971. In addition, since 2016, Canada's frigates participated in various new bilateral, trilateral, and multilateral naval exercise formats, alongside powerful allied contributions, and often with China tacitly in mind.

In the 2016 *Westploy* operation, having maintained Canadian participation in *RIMPAC*, HMCS *Vancouver* initiated participation in Australia's *Kakadu* exercise. This included navies from Australia, Fiji, France, India, Indonesia, Japan, Malaysia, New Zealand, Pakistan, Papua New Guinea, Philippines, South Korea, Singapore, Thailand, Timor Leste, Tonga, U.S., and Vietnam. *Vancouver* activities included replenishment by the Australian tanker HMAS *Success*.

New exercise networks were added with *Operation Poseidon Cutlass* in 2017. HMCS *Ottawa* and HMCS *Winnipeg* conducted underwater, surface, and air warfare exercises with Australia's frigate, HMAS *Ballarat*, in the South China Sea in April. A demonstration of Canada's first bilateral exercise in these waters, wrought with excessive maritime claims by the People's Republic of China. En route to Singapore, *Ottawa* operated with a French frigate, FNS *Prairial*, in the *Malacca Strait*. In May, *Ottawa* led a South Korean destroyer, ROKS *Dae Jo Yeong*, a Filipino offshore patrol boat, BRP *Gregorio Del Pilar*, a French frigate, FNS *Prairial*, and a U.S. destroyer, USS *Sterett*, in maneuvering and communication drills within the Singapore-organized Weapons Multilateral Sea Exercise (WMSX) in the South China Sea. The Western Pacific Naval Symposium (WPNS) organized this exercise and Canada has been an original member since its inception in 1988.

Next, *Ottawa* and *Winnipeg* participated in *Pacific Guardian 17* – a new four-way multilateral exercise in the East China Sea in June, alongside a Japanese destroyer, JS *Inazuma*, a New Zealand frigate, RNZN *Te Kaha*, and a U.S. cargo ship, USS *Wally Schirra*. *Winnipeg* and *Ottawa* then carried out underwater, surface, air, and electronic warfare defense drills in late June with South Korean destroyers, ROKN *Gang Gam Chan* and ROKN *Yulgok Yi One*. *Winnipeg* and *Vancouver* also participated in *Kaedex* ("Maple") exercises during July of 2022 with Japanese destroyers, JS *Umigiri* and JS *Abukama*, in the Sea of Japan. After the Canadian frigates returned to base by August, HMCS *Chicoutimi*, a submarine, commenced a 197-day deployment from Esquimalt the next month in September via Pearl Harbor and Guam to Yokosuka and Sasebo in Japan – a first time public deployment there.

In 2018, *Operation Projection* served as the steppingstone for further and more frequent combined exercises. HMCS *Vancouver* participated in *RIMPAC*; later in the year HMS *Calgary* again participated in the previously mentioned Australian-led *Kakadu* exercise and the *Kaedex* exercise with Japan. Beyond this, *Calgary* initiated *Operation Neon*, which monitored UN sanctions against North Korea in the East China Sea. The *Calgary* then joined in, for the first time, the *Keen Sword* exercises involving extended anti-submarine drills with the U.S. and Japan to include: the aircraft carrier, USS *Ronald Reagan* and Japanese helicopter carrier *JS Hyuga*.

The 2019 *Operation Projection* deployment consisted of two phases, carried out by HMCS *Regina* and then HMCS *Ottawa*. Both performed *Operation Neon* duties in the East China Sea, both transited the Taiwan Strait, and both carried out *Kaedex* exercises with Japan. However, in a new setting, the *Regina* carried out *Kaedex* exercises in June with the Japanese *Indo-Pacific Deployment* group comprised of a helicopter carrier, *JS Izumo*, accompanied by her two Japanese destroyers, *JS Akebono* and *JS Mursame*, by Cam Rahn Bay, Vietnam. *Ottawa* carried out *Kaedex* exercise in October with two Japanese destroyers, *JS Chokai* and *JS Shimakaze*, off Yokosuka, Japan. In another new development, *Regina* initiated Canadian participation in the biannual U.S.-Australia *Talisman Sabre 19* exercise, held in July off Queensland. She sailed alongside the U.S. *Ronald Reagan* Carrier Group and Australia's helicopter dock ship HMAS *Canberra*.

In turn, *Ottawa* also initiated Canadian participation in the second *Pacific Vanguard* exercise off Guam (first held the previous May) in November. The *Ottawa* sailed alongside Australian, United States, and South Korean ships to include Australian destroyer, HMAS *Hobart*, Australian frigates, HMAS *Parramatta* and HMAS *Stuart*, a submarine, a South Korean destroyer, ROKS *Choi Young*, and U.S. cruiser, USS *Chancellorsville*. The *Ottawa* continued to push Canadian involvement in multinational exercises and initiated Canadian participation in the Japanese-led *Annualex 19* exercise, alongside an Australian frigate, HMAS *Parramatta*, Japanese destroyer, *JS Shiranui*, and U.S. destroyer, USS *Milius* in the Philippine Sea.

Despite the scaled back itinerary in 2020 *Operation Projection* due to Covid, HMCS *Winnipeg* joined HMCS *Regina* for the *Rimpac* exercises. As *Regina* returned to Esquimalt, *Winnipeg* deployed further westwards and participated in *Operation Keen*



*Sword*, alongside the Japanese (Escort Flotillas 1 and 4) and U.S. (*Ronald Reagan* Carrier Strike Group) navies in October through November near Japan.



*PEARL HARBOR (June 28, 2022) – Onlookers hold up Canadian flags as Royal Canadian Navy frigate HMCS Vancouver (FFH 331) arrives at Joint Base Pearl Harbor-Hickam to participate in Rim of the Pacific (RIMPAC) 2022, June 28. (U.S. Navy photo by Mass Communication Specialist 2nd Class Maria G. Llanos)*

The following year the 2021 itinerary, though still affected by Covid restrictions, became more robust and introduced new exercise formats. After carrying out *Operation Artemis* anti-narcotics operations in the Arabian Sea and visiting the combined UK/US base at Diego Garcia, HMCS *Calgary* exercised in another trilateral format with a Japanese destroyer, JS *Akebono*, and Australian frigate, HMAS *Anzac*, in the East Indian Ocean, off Sumatra in April. *Calgary* then participated in a bilateral U.S.-Australian exercise, *Talisman Sabre*, held in Queensland in July. The *Calgary* participated in air and anti-submarine drills alongside an Australian frigate, HMAS *Parramatta*, a Japanese destroyer, JS *Makinanmin*, and a South Korean destroyer, ROKS *Wang Geon*.

As the *Calgary* returned to Esquimalt, HMCS *Winnipeg* took up the baton. Moving westwards, in September, the *Winnipeg* joined the new format and participated in *Pacific Crown 21-3*, operating alongside the U.K. (HMS *Queen Elizabeth*) and Japanese (JS *Ise*) carrier groups in the Sea of Japan. Again, in another new format, *Winnipeg* participated in a powerful three-way carrier operation in the Philippine Sea at the start of October. This three-way carrier operation involved the U.S. (USS *Ronald Reagan*, USS *Carl Vinson*), Japanese (JS *Ise*), and U.K. (HMS *Queen Elizabeth*) carrier groups. A New Zealand frigate, HMNZS *Te Kaha*, helped escort the combined carrier strike group as well. *Winnipeg* then sailed through the Taiwan Strait, with U.S. destroyer, USS *Dewey*, in mid-October. Afterwards in the Philippine Sea in late November, *Winnipeg* participated in *Annualex 21* where she sailed alongside an Australian destroyer, HMAS *Brisbane*, an Australian frigate, HMAS *Warramunga*, a German frigate, FGS *Bayern*, Japanese Escort Flotilla 1, and U.S. *Carl Vinson* Carrier Group 1.

The recent 2022 Canadian deployment saw further continuity and change. In terms of continuity, HMCS *Winnipeg* and HMCS *Vancouver* participated in the *RIMPAC* exercises off Hawaii. Both vessels also participated in the powerful *Keen Sword* exercises in Japanese waters, alongside Japanese (20 ships) and the U.S. (10 ships) warships from 10–19 November. Australia (1 ship) and the UK (1 ship) also participated in this exercise as well. Earlier, *Vancouver* participated in the *Pacific Vanguard* exercise in the waters off Guam in late-August, alongside the Japanese Indo-Pacific Deployment (IPD) group (helicopter carrier JS *Izumo*, destroyer JS *Takanami*, and submarine JS *Takashio*), South Korean destroyers (ROKN *Sejong the Great* and ROKN *Munmu the Great*), Australia frigates (HMAS *Sydney* and HMAS *Perth*) and a U.S. destroyer (USS *Barry*). The *Vancouver* accompanied another U.S. destroyer, the USS *Higgins*, through the Taiwan Strait on 20 September.



*The Royal Canadian Navy Halifax-class frigate HMCS Vancouver transits the Taiwan Strait with guided-missile destroyer USS Higgins while conducting a routine transit. Higgins is forward-deployed to the U.S. 7th Fleet area of operations in support of a free and open Indo-Pacific. (Photo by Mass Communication Specialist 1st Class Donavan K. Patubo/US Navy)*

Regarding further changes, new developments in the 2022 deployment consisted of participation by HMCS *Vancouver* in the U.S.-led *Pacific Dragon 2022* missile defense exercise held off Hawaii from 8–14 August. Ships serving alongside *Vancouver* included an Australian frigate, HMAS *Sydney*, Japanese destroyer, JS *Haguro*, South Korean destroyer, ROKS *Serjong the Great*, and U.S. destroyers, USS *Fitzgerald* and USS *William P. Lawrence*. *Vancouver* participated in a trilateral exercise, *Noble Raven 22*, another new trilateral format, in the Philippine Sea from 30 August to 7 September. Ships serving alongside included the U.S. destroyer, USS *Higgins*, Japanese Indo-Pacific Deployment (IPD) group, Japanese helicopter carrier, JS *Izumo*, and Japanese destroyer, JS *Takanami*. *Winnipeg* and *Vancouver* participated in further exercises in the Philippine Sea with the U.S. *Ronald Reagan* Carrier Strike Group, a U.S. amphibious warship, USS *New Orleans*, and Japanese destroyer, JS *Kirisame*, at the start of November.

The Canadian ships also participated in other iterative exercises in the South China Sea. *Winnipeg* participated in the *Noble Raven 22-2* in the South China Sea from 23 September 23 to 1 October. *Winnipeg* participated alongside a U.S. destroyer, USS



*Higgins*, a Japan's Indo-Pacific Deployment (IPD) group, helicopter carrier, *JS Izumo*, destroyer *JS Takanami* and submarine *JS Takashio*. The *Winnipeg* conducted a fuel specific replenishment at sea from the helicopter carrier *JS Izumo*. This event operationalized the Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement (ACSA) signed between Canada and Japan in 2018.

Further bilateral exercises were carried out in the South China Sea by the *Vancouver* with the U.S. destroyer *USS Higgins* on 18 September followed by the *Winnipeg* on October 2. From 4–8 October, *HMCS Winnipeg* joined Australian destroyer, *HMAS Hobart*, Australian frigate, *HMAS Arunta*, Japanese destroyers, *JS Suzutsuki* and *JS Kirisame*, and U.S. destroyers *USS Milius* and *USS Higgins* in *Noble Mist*, where ships practiced surface, subsurface and air defense exercising. It marked the first time this Australia-Canada-Japan-U.S. format has exercised together in the South China Sea.



October 3, 2022 – Canadian frigate *HMCS Winnipeg* conducts a replenishment at sea with *JS Izumo* during an exercise. (JMSDF Photo)

## People's Republic of China Reaction (PRC)

Canadian relations with PRC have deteriorated in recent years. Canada made friendly port calls in 2017 to Shanghai and then in 2018 to Hong Kong. There have been no further ports calls to China since 2019 or afterwards. This change in port deployments reflects the post-2018 deterioration in Canadian-PRC relations catalyzed by the detention of the Huawei executive Meng Wanzhou and immediate counter arrest by the PRC of Michael Spavor and Michael Kovrig in December 2018. However, even without these catalyzing events, PRC-Canadian relations eroded due to larger and less tangible issues to include Canadian human rights criticisms of the PRC policy in Xinjiang and Hong Kong, as well as wider issues and concerns over the demonstrated PRC entanglement in G5 technology.

Canadian participation has grown in naval exercises that Beijing sees as anti-PRC. The PRC [criticized](#) the participation of HMCS *Winnipeg* in *Annualex 2021*, held in the Philippine Sea in late November, alongside Australian, German, Japanese and U.S. ships. The PRC also [denounced](#) *Sea Dragon 22* anti-submarine drills around Guam in January 2022, where a Canadian CP-140 maritime patrol aircraft participated. Canadian [Foreign Office](#) criticism in July 2021 of “China’s escalatory and destabilizing actions in the East and South China Seas,” was immediately denounced by the [Chinese Embassy](#) in Ottawa. The PRC is further irritated by Canada’s increasing deployments into these waters. PRC criticisms over Canadian “[provocative acts](#)” by *Winnipeg*’s transit through the Taiwan Strait alongside U.S. destroyer, USS *Dewey*, in October 2021 were repeated with Chinese denunciations of another “[provocative move](#).” A year later, HMCS *Vancouver* transited the Taiwan Strait alongside U.S. destroyer, USS *Higgins*, in September 2022.

Though Canada has not yet carried out any freedom of navigation operations (FONOPs) in the South China Sea (Taiwan strait transits are geographically confined to the East China Sea), Canadian unilateral and multinational exercises in the South China Sea remain a pressing concern for Beijing. These Canadian activities have increased in frequency and demonstrated by *Ottawa*’s and *Winnipeg*’s previous exercises in the South China Sea in 2016 with the Australian navy (HMAS *Ballarat*); then *Regina*’s exercises with Japan’s *Indo-Pacific Deployment* carrier group off Cam Rahn Bay in 2019. Recently in 2022, *Vancouver* and then *Winnipeg* separately participated in exercises in the South China Sea with U.S. destroyer, USS *Higgins*. *Winnipeg* stayed in these waters to participate in the *Noble Raven 22-2* exercise with Japanese and U.S.

warships followed by *Noble Mist 22* exercise where the *Winnipeg* sailed alongside warships from Australia, Japan, and the U.S.

## India and the Indian Ocean

Although the Canadian Navy now uses “Indo-Pacific” terminology for its operations, Canada has not really expanded its previous Asia-Pacific (i.e., the Pacific and South China Sea) focus into the Indian Ocean. Moreover, whereas active involvement has been seen with French, Australian, Japanese, South Korean, U.K., and U.S. naval forces in various exercise formats, there have been no similar military exercises with India.

In 2017, HMCS *Winnipeg*'s sojourn into the Indian Ocean consisted of a quick friendly port call over from Port Klang to Sri Lanka and Mumbai with no bilateral exercises followed by a hasty return to the South China Sea. There is coolness in Canada-India relations, in part hampered by Sikh pro-Khalistan currents in Canada. This makes Canada's invocation of the Indo-Pacific skewed, as it remains focused on the “Pacific” part rather than the “Indo” part. Geography further compounds this political distancing from India and the Indian Ocean. Situated on the far Pacific Rim, India and the Indian Ocean are even further than the South and East China Sea from the Canadian Pacific shores. The “tyranny of distance” is even further complicated for Canadian projection into the Indian Ocean.

For Canada, the western Indian Ocean is more accessible from Canada's Atlantic than from its Pacific. For example, Mumbai is 11,660 km from Canada's Atlantic headquarters in Halifax, Nova Scotia but 12,328 km from Canada's Pacific headquarters at Esquimalt, British Columbia.

## Looking forward

On 5 December, Defense Minister [Anita Anand](#) welcomed home HMCSs *Vancouver* and *Winnipeg* back to Esquimalt. By then, *Canada's Indo-Pacific Strategy* (denounced by the PRC [Foreign Ministry](#)) promulgated by the government on 27 November robustly criticized China and also identified the need for “increasing the number of frigates deployed on *Operation Projection*, to protect navigation and overflight rights in the East and South China Seas.” Simultaneously, [Anand](#) announced a C\$369.4 mil-



lion package for 2022–2026 “to increase our naval presence in the region”; whereby annually two frigates from Esquimalt would be joined by a third frigate from Halifax, for “boosting our presence, particularly in the Indian Ocean.” A further C\$48.7 million was also allocated to increase Canadian military participation in regional exercises and to bolster military cooperation with Indo-Pacific countries.

A modest but increased Canadian naval presence is projected for the Indo-Pacific, but there are some deployment and partnership issues to keep an eye on. With regard to operations, amid rising pressure by China over Taiwan, will Canada carry out its stated aim to maintain and indeed increase its transit operations in the Taiwan Strait? Will Canada move from general exercising with other partners in the South China Sea, to carry out specific Freedom of Navigation Exercises (FONOPs) in the South China Sea around Chinese holdings? With regard to strategic partners, Canada’s strengthening naval cooperation with Australia, Japan, South Korea, and the U.S. is set to continue, but how far can Canada overcome political frictions over the Khalistan issue to develop impactful and meaningful naval cooperation with India? An omission from current Canadian operations and strategy is naval cooperation with France in the Pacific and Indian Ocean. There is no obvious reason why this should not develop in the Indo-Pacific between these two NATO partners, but will it? Canada is clearly seeking a greater role in the Indo-Pacific, and the evolving nature of its operations and partnerships will merit close observation.

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Featured Image: HMCS Winnipeg, along with HNLMS Evertsen and RFA Tidespring, are shown in formation on Sept. 9 during Exercise Pacific Crown. (UK MOD Crown)

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