A View from the West:

Nine Things for a Canadian Sailor to Know Before Deploying to the Indo-Pacific

Commander Tyson Bergmann and Brett Witthoeft

Credit: Aviator Gregory Cole, Canadian Armed Forces

*HMCS **Vancouver** and HMCS **Ottawa** sail in formation with MV **Asterix**.*

The 2022 Indo-Pacific Strategy commits the Royal Canadian Navy (RCN) to sailing three warships into the Indo-Pacific region (IPR) every year making it important that sailors, defence officials and Canadians know what's going on in that strategic region and how the RCN fits into the larger picture. Inspired by a US Naval Institute blog post, "10 Things Every Sailor and Marine Should Know Before Deploying to Southeast Asia,"[1] this article is aimed at providing a Canadian perspective on the topic.

1. The Indo-Pacific region moves the world.

Because of geography and close institutional, cultural and economic ties – most Canadians live within 150 kilometres of the US border and 75% of Canada's exports go south – Canada is closely tied to the United States. However, there are big strategic changes going on in Asia that are worth the attention of Canadians. The Indo-Pacific Strategy (IPS) notes that the region is home to two-thirds of the world's people, has approximately 45% of the world's Gross Domestic Product (GDP), and is on track to have half of global GDP by 2040.[2] The IPR is Canada's second-largest trading region, ahead of Europe, and is projected to grow even further, especially as US tariffs encourage countries to look for new trade opportunities. Also, what happens in the Indo-Pacific doesn't stay in the Indo-Pacific – for example, port shutdowns in China due to Beijing's strict zero-COVID policy meant empty shelves and higher prices in Canada during the pandemic. As well, the public inquiry on foreign interference revealed that Indo-Pacific regimes are very interested in shaping Canadian policy and attitudes in their favour. These trends show that Canada should be aiming for where the world is going to be, so Canadian involvement in the IPR now is essential for Canada's future success.

2. The Indo-Pacific is primarily a maritime theatre.

A glance at a map of Asia tells us a lot about the character of the region. Japan, the Philippines, Singapore and Australia are all islands that are critically dependent upon seaborne trade. South Korea is effectively an island as North Korea cuts it off from mainland Asia. Southeast Asia can be divided into mainland and maritime states, and Indonesia and Malaysia themselves are cut in two by waterways. Furthermore, the 'Indo' part of the Indo-Pacific – Bangladesh, India and Pakistan – flows into the 'Pacific' part via the Strait of Malacca. As a result, the Indo-Pacific region, unlike North America or Europe, is both divided and connected by water, which makes maritime power there especially important.

This is reflected in the numbers as nine of the top 10 ports worldwide are in Asia. China, South Korea and Japan build over 90% of all new ships every year,[3] and about 33% of all trade globally sails through the South China Sea.[4] This maritime dependence also means that there are many maritime disputes, such as over islands in the East and South China Seas, confrontations over illegal fishing, and questions of mining undersea minerals and energy. As a result, the IPR is home to the largest navies and coast guards in the world to manage these issues.

3. The Indo-Pacific region is very busy.

The region's dependence upon the seas means that maritime traffic is heavy, particularly near chokepoints such as the Malacca and Taiwan Straits in which there is constant

traffic 24/7, 365 days a year. This traffic is a mix of vessels – warships, commercial cargo ships and tankers, and fishing fleets – all sharing the same routes, creating significant physical and electronic congestion. To navigate this traffic jam, RCN operators must be proficient in reading a complex mass of transponder signals.

Even when the mess of ships can be figured out, fishers don't necessarily follow the marine 'rules of the road,' and many don't speak English, the *lingua marina* (though most merchant vessels do), forcing RCN sailors to interpret intentions and actions of other ships, such as dhows suddenly changing course and lasers being shined at the bridge. These actions aren't necessarily malicious – they may be from a fishing crew frustrated that a frigate is too close to their nets – but it does mean that hypervigilance is a must, not only to avoid creating an international incident, but also to stay a step ahead of those who may try to portray Canada as the bad guy.

4. Northeast and Southeast Asia are different sub-regions.

Despite all that connects them, Northeast Asian countries have different maritime interests, capabilities and approaches than those in Southeast Asia. The economies of Japan and South Korea exploded from the 1980s, creating critical interests in securing sea lanes (they import 97%[5] and 98%[6] of their oil and natural gas, and all their trade goes by sea) and upholding international rules to protect these interests. They also have an interest in countering maritime smuggling and ensuring access for fishing fleets. Threats to those interests are mainly 'hard' and 'traditional' and come from their neighbours – China through its growing maritime fleets and aggression, and North Korea through its missile launches and submarines. As a result, Tokyo has built up the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force and Seoul has built up the Republic of Korea Navy, which are now among the largest and most advanced navies in the world.

While Southeast Asia certainly shares these security concerns, particularly when it comes to tensions with China in the South China Sea, that region tends to prioritize 'softer,' 'non-traditional' threats such as climate change, maritime piracy and illegal fishing. This is partly due to the extent of those threats, as Southeast Asia was the centre of maritime piracy in the late 1990s to early 2000s, and illegal fishing cost the region about $6 billion in 2019.[7] But it is also partly a matter of money – Southeast Asian economies are much smaller and were battered by COVID-19 lockdowns – so they are less able to spend on navies and coast guards and can't push back as hard against Chinese incursions.

5. China is front-of-mind for all.

China poses an interesting dilemma for most Indo-Pacific countries: it is their #1 trading partner, while also being their #1 security challenge. After Mao Zedong's death in 1976, China shifted from a largely closed communist economy to a (somewhat) open private sector which prioritized making cheap goods for export. China became the world's factory as companies across the globe turned to Chinese workers to lower their costs. This transformation propelled China into having the second-largest economy and becoming the single largest trade partner for over 120 countries, including the United States, Japan, South Korea and Vietnam. China was Canada's second largest trade partner in 2024, at 7.6%, well behind the United States at 63%.[8] China's neighbours are tightly interwoven into China's export success, as supply lines crisscross Asia, sustaining millions of jobs.

At the same time, China is the main source of insecurity. For Japan, regular China Coast Guard patrols near the Senkaku Islands and growing military exercises in the Taiwan Strait, a critical Japanese sea lane, have pushed Japan out of its post-World War II pacifism. South Korea has similar sea lane anxieties, as well as concerns about China's longstanding support for North Korea, which

Credit: Aviator Gregory Cole, Canadian Armed Forces

(From top) USS ***Ralph Johnson****, JS* ***Izumo****, an* ***Oyashio****-class submarine, JS* ***Samidare*** *and HMCS* ***Ottawa*** *sail together in the Philippine Sea on 6 September 2023.*

threatens South Korea on a near-daily basis. In Southeast Asia, the China Coast Guard and maritime militia often harass offshore energy platforms, and Chinese fishing fleets regularly fish illegally in the waters of Southeast Asian countries, leading to confrontations between fishers and coast guards.

Beijing knows that it has economic leverage over other countries and isn't afraid to use it. Canadians are probably aware that China banned imports of Canadian canola, beef and pork, and took the 'Two Michaels' hostage as part of its retaliation for the arrest of Huawei executive Meng Wanzhou in 2018. Beijing also banned Philippine bananas in 2012 amid their Scarborough Shoal dispute, the South Korean company Lotte was forced out of business in China after it gave land for the American THAAD missile system in South Korea in 2017, and Australian barley, beef, coal and wine were blocked after Canberra dared to call for an inquiry into the origin of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. Southeast Asia in particular is very aware of this trade versus security dilemma, so it prefers to downplay disputes to avoid Chinese retribution.

6. Regional relations are varied and complex.

Unlike the Euro-Atlantic, the Indo-Pacific region does not have a North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) or similar alliance that navies can readily plug into. Instead, the IPR has a patchwork of bilateral alliances, organizations and 'minilaterals.' The hard alliance side is led by the United States, which has defence treaties with Australia, Japan, New Zealand, South Korea and the Philippines that form the basis for most regional military cooperation, including exercises and operations in which the RCN participates. This hub-and-spoke model, where the United States is the pivot point between its allies, is still central.

Credit: Corporal Alexandre Brisson, Canadian Armed Forces

*HMCS **Montreal**'s hockey team faces off against the Philippine National Men's Hockey Team in Manila during a visit in 2024 as part of **Operation Horizon**.*

The IPR is home to many organizations and forums for regional coordination. The big one is the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and its numerous subgroups, such as the ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting that Canada is working to get into. There are also several sub-regional organizations, such as the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (for central Asia), and the Pacific Islands Forum. As well, there are important high-level inter-government meetings, the key example of which is the Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore, attended by defence ministers and military chiefs every year. On top of these are numerous free trade and economic agreements, with the main ones being the Japan-led Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) and the China-led Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP).

Finally, there are 'minilateral' arrangements which have sprung up as IPR countries see the need to cooperate but don't necessarily want full alliances. Examples include the Australia-United Kingdom-United States (AUKUS) agreement centred around building nuclear-powered submarines for Australia, and the 'Quad' of Australia, India, Japan and the United States, which focuses on naval exercises but has also worked on varied projects such as COVID-19 vaccine production and distribution.[9]

This hodgepodge of groups has both upsides and downsides. It allows countries to participate in issues important to them, but it also means there is no single club where standards are set and operations are managed. This is a challenge for Canada, which counts itself as in the Indo-Pacific region, but doesn't have large numbers of diplomats, policy officials and military officers to cover all the organizations all the time. Added to this is that each IPR country has its own different perceptions of threats and how to respond to them. The levels of risk tolerance vary significantly even among Canada's friends and allies, which means that a great deal of effort must go into understanding and managing how government priorities play out at sea. As a result, the RCN needs to be an adaptable partner that can shift from full blue-water warfighting activities with one navy in one area, to being a more back-of-house diplomatic and training partner in another.

7. Canada is not the United States.

While directly tying national security together through NORAD and the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) regularly integrating with US military forces overseas, Canadian and American interests and capabilities are not the same in the Indo-Pacific. The United States has vastly more resources including, until 2015, the world's largest navy, while Canada only has 12 long-range frigates. This means the RCN must carefully choose where and when

Credit: Corporal Alisa Strelley, Canadian Armed Forces

*HMCS **Vancouver** arrives in Busan, South Korea, during **Operation Neon** on 23 October 2023.*

it has warships in the IPR. Canada also does not have the history and alliance network that the United States does and is not viewed as central to the Indo-Pacific. An annual poll of Southeast Asians in 2024 put Canada second-last in a list of strategically relevant countries.[10]

In terms of how this plays out at sea, aside from MV *Asterix*, the RCN doesn't (yet) have a consistent at-sea replenishment capability, which means that Canadian warships are reliant on port access and services from regional partners to operate across the region. Canada has been steadily adding to its Indo-Pacific treaties, such as the forthcoming visiting forces agreement with the Philippines, but the reality is that the RCN isn't the top priority for regional states, and an RCN warship may not get all it asks for in port. The good news is that Canada's efforts are being recognized – Canada wasn't even mentioned in that Southeast Asian poll until 2024, after the projects and efforts rooted in the Indo-Pacific Statement, such as Team Canada trade missions and new visa offices, had some time to progress.

8. Weather, weather, everywhere.

While each ocean has its own unique environment, IPR waters have special challenges as the same high winds and rain that bring nourishing monsoons also bring dangerous typhoons. Bad weather has many implications for naval operations, from altering or cancelling planned exercises, to reducing shore leave, to traffic jams as ships seek shelter from an approaching storm. The weather in the Indo-Pacific demands regular course and plan changes, including the occasional creative invocation of treaties, though this creates its own challenge, as exploiting loopholes can get the job done but may irritate foreign governments. The good news is that regional navies are used to bad weather and have well-developed responses, which may be new to the RCN, but provide an opportunity to learn from local hosts.

9. Canada has much to learn from the Indo-Pacific.

The IPS lists capacity-building as a significant contribution for Canada in the IPR. This includes exercising with and training Asian sailors, cooperating against cybercrime and terrorism, and sharing information such as through the Dark Vessel Detection program with the Philippines. Different Indo-Pacific navies have different missions – some have law enforcement roles, which the RCN doesn't, others focus on coastal skills that the RCN doesn't necessarily practice – which can limit opportunities for the RCN to interact. On the flip side, IPR navies regularly deal with both naval and non-traditional threats in ways to which the RCN is only intermittently exposed. Asian sailors have likely had close and dangerous encounters with Chinese forces and their neighbours, and have had to de-escalate them through creative non-confrontational means.

They are also the first to encounter new tactics – particularly those in the 'grey zone,' which are not openly hostile, but also are not peaceful – which will all-but-certainly be tried out on the RCN at some point. As a result, while the RCN is among the top tier of IPR blue-water navies and is able to boost regional capacity, Indo-Pacific navies have much to teach Canada about the reality of operating in contested waters.

Notes

1. Commander John Bradford, US Navy (Retired) and Lieutenant Commander Blake Herzinger, US Navy Reserve, "10 Things Every Sailor and Marine Should Know Before Deploying to Southeast Asia," US Naval Institute blog, 2 August 2021.
2. Government of Canada, "Canada's Indo-Pacific Strategy," 27 November 2022.
3. United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), *Review of Maritime Transport 2024*, 22 October 2024, p. 38.
4. *Ibid*, p. 19.
5. US Energy Information Administration, "Country Analysis: Japan," 7 July 2023.
6. US Energy Information Administration, "Country Analysis: South Korea," 13 April 2023.
7. Asmiati Malik, "IUU Fishing as an Evolving Threat to Southeast Asia's Maritime Security," *Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative*, 16 November 2022.
8. Statistics Canada, "The International Trade Explorer," 3 April 2025.
9. Erin Murphy, Katherine Bliss and J. Stephen Morrison, "The Quad's Cancer Moonshot Initiative," Center for Strategic & International Studies, 22 October 2024.
10. "The State of Southeast Asia," ISEAS Yusof Ishak Institute, 2 April 2024, p. 38.

*Commander Tyson Bergmann is Commanding Officer of HMCS **Vancouver**, which completed a six-month deployment to the Indo-Pacific in 2024.*

Brett Witthoeft is a senior analyst at Maritime Forces Pacific.