

# Canadian warships join “freedom of navigation” exercises in South China Sea

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Alongside American, Australian, Japanese and South Korean naval vessels, two Canadian warships have participated in recent months in provocative “freedom of navigation” exercises and wargames in the South and East China Seas.

Thanks chiefly to US imperialist machinations, the South China Sea, large parts of which are claimed by China, has become an international flashpoint—one that threatens to spark a direct military clash between nuclear-armed powers.

Canada’s involvement in this highly-explosive region is bound up with Ottawa’s intimate, decades-long military-strategic partnership with Washington, and specifically a secret 2013 bilateral agreement for increased joint military activity in the Asia-Pacific region.

*National Post* correspondent Matthew Fisher, who enjoys close ties to the upper echelons of the Canadian Armed Forces, reported earlier this month that two Canadian ships, the HMCS Winnipeg and HMCS Ottawa, were shadowed by Chinese boats during exercises in the contested South China Sea. The two frigates were involved in a “freedom of passage” exercise when two People’s Liberation Army Navy frigates came within a distance of three nautical miles. Subsequently, when the Winnipeg and Ottawa moved to the East China Sea, where they participated in maneuvers with Japanese and Australian ships, a Chinese intelligence vessel monitored their movements.

At one point during their voyage through the South China Sea, one of the Canadian ships passed within 13 miles of the Scarborough Shoals, control over which is disputed between China and the Philippines. This is just one mile outside the 12-mile radius a country is allowed to claim as its sovereign territory under international law.

Indicating the extremely tense atmosphere under which exercises in the region take place, and underscoring that even a mishap or misjudgment could lead to an open clash, Chief Petty Officer First Class Sylvain Jaquemot told Fisher, “Whenever we are near an American ship, the Chinese are there. There is not an American ship in the South China Sea that does not get shadowed by a Chinese ship.”

The United States has systematically stoked the territorial disputes in the South China Sea. In addition to repeatedly staging exercises that pass through airspace and waters claimed by China, it has incited Beijing’s regional rivals, including the Philippines, Indonesia, Vietnam, Malaysia and Taiwan, to aggressively pursue their competing territorial claims over South China Sea islets and waters. In the East China Sea, Washington has similarly stirred up frictions between China on one side, and Japan and South Korea on the other.

As part of its efforts to deepen its long-standing strategic alliance with Washington, the Trudeau government has largely fallen into line behind Washington’s anti-China stance and signaled that in the event of a military clash Canada will stand with the US. Continuing on from where the Harper Conservative government left off, Trudeau’s Liberals backed the adoption of the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) trade deal, part of the Obama administration’s anti-China “Pivot to Asia” policy.

The Trump administration’s abandonment of the TPP has been combined with an intensification of US imperialist provocations against Beijing, which Trump labels a “currency manipulator.” Trudeau, meanwhile, has made clear his determination to enhance Canadian imperialism’s partnership with a Trump-led US. He has embraced the idea of a more protectionist North American trade bloc aimed at challenging China economically and signed on to the “modernization” of NORAD.

In a major address last month, Canadian Foreign Minister Chrystia Freeland labeled China one of the principal “threats” to global stability. In remarks that lauded Washington’s “outsized role” in upholding global capitalism in the seven decades since the end of the Second World War, she stressed that it is necessary to find ways to “encourage” China to accept a US-led global geopolitical order.

The Trudeau government has fully embraced Washington’s hardline approach to North Korea’s missile tests, which has included the renunciation of “strategic

patience,” provocative war games aimed at testing the ability of US and South Korean forces to “decapitate” the North Korean leadership, and direct threats of military action.

In April, Defence Minister Harjit Sajjan declared that the Canadian Armed Forces, which remain part of the US-led UN Korean Command that waged war in Korea between 1950-53, must be ready to redeploy to the peninsula in the event war erupts anew. Such a “regime-change” war would endanger the lives of millions of people and would be aimed at intensifying military-strategic pressure on Beijing.

The deployment of the HMCS Winnipeg and HMCS Ottawa to the region demonstrates Canadian imperialism’s determination to strengthen its presence in the Asia-Pacific. Both ships will return to their home port in British Columbia next month after a five-month mission that will have seen them travel to ports in the US, Malaysia, the Philippines, Japan, South Korea, Sri Lanka and Singapore. Two frigates will conduct a similar tour next year.

This is part of a longer-term strategy to increase Canada’s naval presence in the Asia-Pacific. In June, the head of Royal Canadian Navy, Vice Admiral Ron Lloyd, said Canada is being drawn “deeper into the Pacific than we would have typically in the past.” He praised the Liberals’ decision to increase from 12 to 15 the number of new warships Canada will procure over the next decade, saying the navy must have the means to have a significant presence in both the Atlantic and Pacific simultaneously.

Chief of the Defence Staff Jonathan Vance explained that a key element of the recent Asian naval deployment was to familiarize Canadian crewmen with navigating the Malacca Strait, a critical trade route which the US and its allies would use as a chokepoint to impose an economic blockade on China in the event of a war or war-crisis. “If one wants to have any respect or gravitas you have to be in that region,” Vance told Fisher. “The security of the Straits of Malacca are important to us because a lot of trade goes through there.”

Led by the *Globe and Mail*, the traditional mouthpiece for Toronto’s Bay Street elite, much of the corporate-controlled media is urging the Trudeau government to adopt an even harder line against Beijing. While pledging enhanced military-security cooperation with the US, the Liberals have taken steps to initiate talks with Beijing on a free trade agreement, principally so as to bolster Canadian energy and raw materials exports.

For months the *Globe* has been mounting an increasingly shrill anti-China campaign, claiming the Trudeau government is ignoring vital national security concerns in its pursuit of closer economic ties with Beijing. This reached fever pitch last month when it denounced Ottawa for allowing a Chinese firm to purchase Vancouver-based

Norsat International, a manufacturer of satellite communications equipment whose clients include the militaries of Canada, the US and NATO (see: “Disputes sharpen in Canadian ruling elite over its China policy”).

The conflict within ruling circles over its China policy has been sharpened by the Trump administration’s protectionist “America First” agenda. The Canadian bourgeoisie fears that its privileged access to the US market, upon which it relies for 75 percent of its exports, could be diminished, leading important sections of corporate Canada to be all the more eager to pursue economic opportunities in China.

Following North Korea’s successful testing of an intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) earlier this month, the *Globe* editorial board once again lashed out against China. It blamed Beijing for Pyongyang’s actions, since it balks at completely crippling North Korea’s economy, then complained that China “seems to see this as another opportunity to try to diminish American influence in the region.”

This could not be clearer. The *Globe* wants Ottawa to align itself even more fully with Washington’s reckless drive to reassert its hegemony over the Asia-Pacific region, which is the chief reason for Pyongyang’s reactionary nationalist bluster. As well as pushing for an abandonment of free trade talks with Beijing, a demand now taken up by Conservative leader Andrew Scheer, the *Globe* is agitating for Canada to be even more emphatic in its support for Washington’s military-strategic offensive against nuclear-armed China.



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