

Now is the Time for a New Canadian Defence Policy

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Credit: Official White House Photo by Cameron Smith

President Joe Biden delivers remarks as part of the AUKUS announcement on 15 September 2021, in the East Room of the White House.

The AUKUS agreement signed by Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States was announced on 15 September 2021. Besides supplying Australia with at least eight nuclear-powered submarines, it promises to transfer sensitive technology among the three countries, such as cyber capabilities, artificial intelligence and quantum computing. As a strategic shift, however, this agreement is significant for the United States because it illustrates a dramatic move to counter China. As Stephen Walt of Harvard University writes, “it is a move designed to discourage or thwart any future Chinese bid for regional hegemony.”¹ A day after the AUKUS news, the United States announced a substantial increase in its military presence in and around Australia.

Military and defence issues never strike a high priority with the Canadian government around the Cabinet table. With respect to defence, for many years Canada has not had much of a presence or interest in what is now referred to as the ‘Indo-Pacific’ region. Since the Second World War Canada’s defence focus has been primarily on Europe under NATO. Should Canada be shifting its defence focus to the Pacific as well, and does it have the ability to allocate limited resources to a two-front area of operations? Another question is how the AUKUS agreement will affect Canada’s national security policies in general and defence policies specifically. This question can only be answered by clear policy and strategic direction that is currently missing. Absent this, Canadian Armed Forces

(CAF) activity in the region will likely be ad hoc, reactive, merely symbolic and for the most part ineffective relative to resources spent. This article will examine whether Canada needs a new defence policy, in particular with regard to the Indo-Pacific region.

The AUKUS Agreement

For the past decade China has increased its military presence in Southeast Asia by building artificial islands in the South China Sea which contain airstrips, ports, missile bases and communications centres. These actions have been undertaken despite competing claims from Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Taiwan and Vietnam. As well as the activities at sea, in 2020 Chinese troops confronted Indian Army soldiers on their common border. Chinese aircraft are regularly entering Taiwanese airspace and Chinese warships often enter its territorial waters.

The AUKUS agreement is rooted in the context of Chinese actions and in the now-cancelled project to replace Australia’s submarines with the *Shortfin Barracuda* submarines. The nuclear-powered submarines to be acquired by the Australian Navy under the AUKUS agreement will be a significant adversary for the People’s Liberation Army (Navy) (PLAN) fleet. The new submarines could stay at sea for lengthy periods of time and their missions could include intelligence gathering and disgorging special forces as well as holding Chinese surface ships and submarines at risk.

The submarines will be built based on either the American *Virginia*-class or Britain's *Astute*-class, with technology from some combination of the two countries' defence contractors. Such submarines are able to project offensive firepower by launching long-range missiles to China's mainland while sitting many miles offshore in the South China Sea. These boats can be based in Darwin on the north coast or Brisbane on the east.

The deal has strategic implications for the United States as well. As the foremost naval power since the end of the Second World War, the US Navy has projected power across the Asia-Pacific region via what historian Bruce Cumings calls an "archipelago of empire."²² This refers to a series of naval bases established from Hawaii to Guam to Okinawa in Japan and Diego Garcia in the Indian Ocean. With the AUKUS agreement, the United States "has now, in effect, a beefed-up continent-sized base for its own operations as well as a reinvigorated ally."²³

Canada's Defence Policy and China

Based on the surprise with which the Canadian government reacted when the AUKUS agreement was announced, it was clear that Ottawa was neither involved nor informed. What does the agreement mean for Canada? Was Canada purposely excluded, or simply not considered at all? Canada has been involved in the 'Five Eyes' intelligence-sharing arrangement consisting of Australia, Canada, New Zealand, United Kingdom and United States since its inception. Does this new AUKUS arrangement indicate the exclusion of Canada (and New Zealand) from intelligence information-sharing in the future? Has Ottawa's constant delay about making a decision on Huawei and 5G communication technology meant that security partners are moving on without Canada?

And, for the purposes of this article, does it mean that, after close to five years, it is time for a replacement of the 2017 defence policy *Strong, Secure, Engaged* (SSE), recognizing the international landscape has changed dramatically since this document was published? SSE needs updating in a number of ways – in particular, a new relationship with Russia, more focus on new threats and how to address them – but this article will focus on the changed behaviour of China, and how Canadian defence policy needs to change to reflect this.

In the years since SSE was published, there has been a resurgence of great power competition embodied in the deteriorated US-China relationship. As Camille Raymond and Marco Munier note, "[t]he US is clear in its desire not to let China achieve its goals of power and influence in the world."²⁴ It is also clear that the United States is opposed to China achieving regional hegemony. In view of the sharper tone to international relations, will the United States call on Canada for support in the region?

What should the new Canadian defence policy look like as a result of the AUKUS agreement? Many critics of SSE would argue that the current defence policy doesn't articulate a strategic direction at all and does not identify Canadian defence priorities. Raymond and Munier state:

Rising tensions in the Asia-Pacific are bringing back an issue that is often overlooked in this country: identifying and prioritizing threats. The 2017 defence statement is a perfect example of a defence policy without a defence strategy. The document fails to clearly identify threat actors and fails to prioritize threats. Canada will have to make choices to deal with the rise of China and Russia, as its ally Australia, for example, has chosen to join forces with the United States and the UK in the Asia-Pacific.⁵

In formulating a new defence policy, many would argue that Canada must first produce a *China* strategy. David L. Cohen, in his September 2021 Senate confirmation hearing to become US Ambassador to Canada, stated "we are all waiting for Canada to release its framework for its overall China policy."⁶ From the beginning of modern relations with China when Pierre Elliott Trudeau was Prime Minister, both Conservative and Liberal governments – as did other Western leaders – assumed that increasing interaction and trade would lead China to adopt democracy and human rights and gradually moderate its political system. This has led to "five decades of Canadian leaders grossly overestimating their ability to bring change to China, failing to recognize that China is uninterested in embracing so-called Western values, and getting mercilessly played by Chinese leaders."⁷



US Marines and Australian soldiers from 3rd Royal Australian Regiment load on to landing craft which will move them from King Beach in Bowen, Australia, to HMAS *Canberra* (LHD 2), 26 July 2021, during *Talisman Sabre 2021*.

Early in October 2021, Foreign Minister at the time, Marc Garneau, indicated that Canada would follow a four-fold approach to China: coexist, compete, cooperate and challenge. Charles Burton, in an article in *The Globe and Mail*, stated that Garneau should have added a fifth approach, “capitulation.”⁸ In the pursuit of trade issues, Canadian politicians continue to turn a blind eye to events taking place in China. This includes a significant military build-up of the People’s Liberation Army and Navy (PLA/PLAN), Uyghur genocide, the repression of freedoms in Hong Kong, extensive espionage and harassment in other countries including Canada, the Belt and Road Initiative, claims in the South and East China Seas, and threats towards Taiwan. In 2017, President Xi Jinping called the reunification with Taiwan an “inevitable requirement for realizing great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation.”⁹ The Taiwan Defence Minister stated recently that China will be capable of mounting a full-scale invasion of Taiwan by 2025.¹⁰

After the increasing number of worrisome actions – plus the incarceration of the two Michaels for nearly three years in Chinese jails – it is hard to understand the Liberal government’s current position towards China. Canada’s Ambassador to China, Dominic Barton, continued to stress doing business there. Barton’s background in the business world has been seen by some to conflict with his role of Ambassador. Under his leadership at global consulting company McKinsey, the firm “provided services to at least 22 of Beijing’s 100 largest state-owned conglomerates, including the construction corporation that has been illegally building the militarized islands in the South China Sea.”¹¹ If the Trudeau government is serious about restoring Canada’s global reputation and handling the security threat posed by Xi Jinping’s China, then, to quote

an op-ed in the *National Post* by Terry Glavin, “the first thing to do would be to rid us all of Dominic Barton.”¹² This first step has been taken, as Barton announced his resignation from the position as of the end of December 2021.

This brings us back to the question of revising/updating *Strong, Secure, Engaged*. The government must re-adjust security and defence issues relative to economic interests in dealing with China. Canada seems to make economic issues paramount over the potential security threats posed by China not only in the Asia-Pacific region but by the Belt and Road initiative as well, which has world-wide strategic implications.

Many people would argue that Canada’s position in the Five Eyes intelligence-sharing community has been eroded as a result of the AUKUS agreement which creates a separate group for three of the five members of the pact. Without some revisions and fine-tuning of defence policy pertaining to China, it is possible that AUKUS intelligence sharing with Canada will be substantially reduced in the future. Regardless of whether Canada was even approached to be a party to the AUKUS deal, it is likely there was concern that it has not articulated its interests in policy or strategy in the Indo-Pacific region, and therefore had nothing to bring to the table. There has been little in the way of messaging from Ottawa that it is prepared to join traditional allies in taking a harder line towards China or, more importantly, taking concrete actions such as rejecting Huawei, that has given allies any indication of where this country is headed with respect to China.

Conclusions

It is time for Canada to write a new defence policy to meet the global threats that are now facing this country. The



Credit: Indonesian Coast Guard

Indonesian Coast Guard and Navy ships are pictured in this undated photo at the Surabaya Naval Base. An updated defence policy could indicate if Canada plans enhanced relations with states in the Indo-Pacific region, such as Indonesia.



Credit: Naval Group

A computer illustration shows the French *Barracuda* submarine design, originally selected to be the Australian navy's next submarine.

geostrategic situation has evolved rapidly and SSE needs to reflect the new defence environment. Canada's decades-long policy of commercial interaction with China continues to trump human rights and security concerns, despite China's transgressions. As Raymond and Muncier argue:

In all cases, Canada must clearly identify and prioritize the issues and actors that pose a threat. This identification and prioritization will allow Canada to target the contributions it can make according to their importance to Canadian interests, but also to the expectations of allies... Canada can no longer afford to sprinkle its capabilities in all regions of the world: it must focus on regions in which it has priority strategic interests. Canada cannot afford to be totally independent of its allies. Canada must therefore prioritize partnerships that support Canada's chosen path, whatever that may be.¹³

The AUKUS agreement was a wake-up call, but Canadian defence policy needs updating for many reasons. As a result of the AUKUS agreement, in light of the build-up of Chinese forces and increased attention by the United States, Canada should be looking at increasing its orientation towards the Indo-Asia-Pacific region. This was not emphasized in the 2017 document. Has Canada's neglect of the region led to an inability to play a useful role there? What would Canada's position be if China attacked Taiwan? Should a China policy clearly articulate that defence and security matters are paramount over trade issues? The decision as to whether Huawei should be banned from Canada's 5G network must be addressed, sooner rather than later. What is Canada's position on China's huge increase in its naval forces, and its maritime claims? By building a number of aircraft carriers China has indicated that the PLAN plans to move towards 'blue water' interests around the globe to compete with the US Navy. Should priority be placed on the RCN moving more warships to the West Coast?

Unlike the general statements comprising the 2017 defence policy, a new defence policy should not only identify the probable threats, but also note the risks to this country. For example, what new weapons can Russia and China deliver which they could not five years ago? What capabilities and weapons are available to the Chinese (and Russians) and what threat do they pose to Canada? What will Canada do to address these threats?

In terms of strategic direction for defence, the current document is lacking so there is a need to update it, if only to give some policy coverage as to where the Department of National Defence (DND) is prepared to allocate resources and whether this includes the Indo-Pacific region. Or



Credit: MC2 Jessica Hattell

HMCS *Winnipeg* arrives at Okinawa White Beach Naval Facility, 15 November 2021, during *Operation Projection-Neon* while enforcing United Nations sanctions on North Korea.



Credit: Zhang Lei, via eng.chinamil.com.cn

The Chinese aircraft carrier *Liaoning* sails as part of a combat exercise at an unidentified area east of the Bashi Channel in the western Pacific in April 2018.

conversely, the policy could be that Canada has no interest or capacity to participate in that region on a sustained basis or in support of defence initiatives with traditional allies there. But there must be some strategic direction.

The current government has needlessly squandered some of Canada's good relations in the region. For example, in 2017 when Prime Minister Trudeau declined to meet with the leaders of the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), this negatively affected perceptions of Canada and its commitment to the region.¹⁴ As well, despite increased spending on the Royal Canadian Navy (RCN) in recent years, Canada is seen as a laggard with regard to defence spending and international influence.

There are other elements of SSE that need to be rethought or given enhanced emphasis. As a major element of the AUKUS agreement relates to submarines, Canada should indicate if it is serious about replacing its submarines. As well, a new defence policy must examine how best to establish the latest technology such as artificial intelligence, cyber warfare and quantum computing for both defensive and offensive warfare. These technological elements are included in the AUKUS agreement, and Canada must consider them too.

It is clear that the Arctic has become strategically important with the reduction of sea ice in the region, allowing for more foreign shipping. This means that a new defence policy must pay more attention to the Arctic. China and Russia have developed new weapons and new capabilities to enter the Arctic. In a Macdonald-Laurier Institute report released in September 2021, Jeffrey Collins warned that "Canada's ability to exert influence in the vast maritime domain will be tested as the demand for resources and northern sea access increases in the coming decades."¹⁵ Would these weapons be deployed in the Arctic by submarines, surface ships or aircraft? In determining such risks, a new defence policy should table priorities for all three services.

Although this article focuses on the AUKUS agreement and China, Canada must also remember relations with

the United States and participation in NORAD. A major defence priority for Canada (and the United States) is the security of North America, and to achieve that means an upgrade of the North Warning System. The Canadian government must make a decision sooner rather than later whether to contribute Canada's share of funding in cooperation with the United States to complete this project.

It is an appropriate time now for the new Liberal government to address security and defence matters by drafting a new defence policy. The government should address new global strategic interests and formulate a document which includes its priorities, threats, risks and regions in which to concentrate Canadian defence planning. And because it is likely that conflict in the Indo-Pacific region will primarily be in the maritime arena, this means some focus on the RCN in Canadian defence policy. 🇨🇦

Notes

1. Stephen Walt, quoted in "AUKUS Reshapes the Strategic Landscape of the Indo-Pacific" (also referred to as "Enter AUKUS"), *The Economist*, 25 September 2021, p. 17.
2. Bruce Cumings, quoted in *Ibid.*, p. 19.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 19.
4. Camille Raymond and Marco Munier, "Continental Defence Modernization and the Future of Canadian Defence Policy," Network for Strategic Analysis (NSA), 29 September 2021, p. 2.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 3.
6. See David Cohen quoted in "U.S. Senate Votes to Send Tech Exec David Cohen to Ottawa as Biden's Envoy," CTV News/The Canadian Press, 2 November 2021.
7. "Relations: Trudeau will Face Tough Choices as He Navigates Trade, Security and Tech with China," *The Globe and Mail*, 9 October 2021, p. O-8.
8. Charles Burton, "Canada Can't have it Both Ways When it Comes to China. The Government Must Ban Huawei from Our 5G Infrastructure," *The Globe and Mail*, 8 October 2021.
9. Jesse Snyder, "Years of Neglect Hinder Canada's Support of Taiwan," *Edmonton Journal*, 6 October 2021.
10. "Taiwan Fears China Invasion by 2025," *Calgary Herald*, 7 October 2021.
11. Terry Glavin, "Canada Needs a New Ambassador to China – Dominic Barton Must Go," *National Post*, 14 October 2021.
12. *Ibid.*
13. See Raymond and Muncier, "Continental Defence Modernization and the Future of Canadian Defence Policy," p. 3.
14. For more on the implications of this, see Kim Nossal, quoted in Snyder, "Years of Neglect Hinder Canada's Support of Taiwan."
15. Jeffrey Collins quoted in *ibid.*

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