



## Maritime Threats to Canada

Canada is a maritime state, heavily reliant on seaborne trade for its economic health and connectivity to the rest of the world. Indeed, the vast majority of Canada's imports from outside of North America arrive on vessels crossing the oceans, ranging from clothing to cell phones, from vehicles to food. Energy too is imported aboard tankers – in 2016, for instance, just under a third of Canada's oil imports arrived from OPEC countries, including Algeria, Nigeria, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, exports from Canada, which are key to sustaining and cultivating regional and national industries – ranging from energy to lumber, grain, and energy – also travel mostly over the oceans. This is particularly the case for exports destined for countries other than the United States. Canada's participation in global marine trade is thus contingent upon its ability to safely and securely use the oceans. It relies upon freedom of navigation and good order at sea. The disruption of that order could bring severe disruptions to Canada's trade activities – to its ability to secure imports and deliver its own exports overseas.

Without the world's oceans, the nation's supply chain would be fractured, with extensive ramifications for Canadian consumers and businesses, as well as for Canada's broader economic health and wellbeing. Canada's sovereignty could also be jeopardized. Thus, Canada's existence as a maritime state exposes it to, and compels its attention towards, both threats *to* the oceans (such as pollution, climate change, and over-fishing), as well as threats *from* the oceans (for instance, criminal activity, piracy, illegal migration, shipping disruptions, and competing naval forces).

Among the potential threats to maritime security originating *from* the oceans, the naval forces of other states pose the greatest and most obvious threat. Although the culmination of the Cold War had initially seemed to usher in an era of peace and stability, as well as the conclusion of great power rivalry and confrontation, that competition has been reignited. China and Russia, in particular, are increasingly prioritizing the expansion and enhancement of their naval capacities and forces,<sup>2</sup> compelling other states to shore up their own naval forces in response. The consequent competition imperils good order at sea, escalating international tensions and, of course, the potential for destruction in the event that such tensions come to a head.

Current developments in Asia illustrate how these simmering great power rivalries can disrupt the dominance of good order at sea. China has claimed as its own territory Japanese waters in the East China Sea and entire South China Sea (SCS). Other states in the region dispute and challenge both claims. Perhaps partially in response, China continues to push forward with a major program of naval shipbuilding. It launched its third aircraft carrier in 2022,<sup>3</sup> and it has also developed anti-access/area-denial (A2/AD) weapons capable of targeting naval forces seeking to travel through the international maritime regions claimed by China. It has constructed islands and islets in the SCS and militarized them with military surveillance facilities and runways. It continues its development of electronic warfare equipment able to jam the weapons and navigation systems of ships transiting the region, on which tests started in July 2018. Although the US Navy has served as a guarantor of freedom of navigation and the freedom of the seas since the Second World War,

Chinese military forces cautiously monitor – and China emphatically protests – its freedom of navigation operations (FONOP) near Taiwan and in the SCS. Given the region's vast undersea resources, and the trillions of dollars of trade that moves through these seas each year, China's expansive claims and burgeoning naval power are a source of international concern, particularly for Canadian allies in the region.

The stability of the international maritime theatre is being shaken further by Russia's rebuilding of its naval forces following their deterioration in the years following the Cold War. Russia again has submarines patrolling in the Arctic and the north Atlantic, and past actions have demonstrated the influence that maritime security considerations have on the state's political actions and decisions. For instance, Russia's 2014 seizure of Crimea (formerly part of the Soviet Union) from Ukraine was in part prompted by the fact that the Russian Navy's Black Sea Fleet was based in Crimea and thus in a foreign country, a point of contention and dissatisfaction for the newly assertive Russia. Furthermore, in August 2007, a Russian submarine planted a flag on the sea floor at the North Pole, which, while having no legal ramifications, was a clear illustration of Russian perceptions of the extent of their territory. This, of course, could be of particular concern to Canada given its own territorial and sovereignty claims in the region, especially as Russia continues to regenerate the naval forces required to act more aggressively.

In addition to the potential maritime threats posed by the budding naval capabilities of such foreign states as China and Russia, piracy presents another threat to good order at sea internationally. Piracy off the coast of Somalia has, for much of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, challenged and disrupted trade, and piracy has also grown to plague trade in the Gulf of Guinea on Africa's west coast. In Somalia, piracy has its roots partly in foreign fishing ships' illegal over-fishing in Somalian waters. Given the lack, for several years, of a Somalian government, and therefore the absence of a Somalian navy or coast guard to patrol the waters, fishermen turned to piracy to address the over-fishing themselves, in a practice that has endured given its immense profits. The piracy in the Gulf of Guinea similarly stemmed from on-land governance issues, namely inequality and unemployment. Though derived from on-land issues, such piracy has tremendous at-sea consequences. The threat of piracy compels tankers and cargo ships to vary their schedules and routes, increase their speed of transit through dangerous areas, increase their insurance coverage, construct safe rooms, employ security guards, and adopt systems and measures to repel individuals attempting to board their vessels. Though aiming to mitigate their risk, such efforts are expensive, translating into increased shipping rates and, subsequently, increased prices for consumers. These economic ramifications are in addition to the physical threat that piracy poses to vessels and crews transiting the affected regions. Although piracy is typically far from Canada's shores, its impacts on key international shipping routes and, consequently, global trade makes it a critical concern for Canada.

Nor is piracy the only criminal enterprise to be increasingly at home on global waters. Crime generally is becoming progressively international, involving the smuggling of weapons, drugs, and people, sometimes over significant distances. The oceans offer attractive routes for this traffic, especially as borders close and travel by land becomes more difficult. Thus, rather than, for instance, drugs crossing from Latin America to the United States, traffickers adopt fast boats and even small submarines to transport drugs across the Caribbean. Such crime threatens the security of all countries, including Canada, exposing residents to the risks of illegal drugs, prohibited weapons, and human trafficking.

Sometimes, domestic and international political tensions can present threats to maritime security and hamper the safety of the seas in adjacent waters. For example, the conflict in Yemen continues to imperil good order at sea given Yemen's location beside the Gulf of Aden and the Red Sea, through which cargo ships and tankers pass while en route to or transiting from Asia, India, the Middle East, and Europe through the Suez Canal. Indeed, the conflict has seen missiles being fired at ships from the shore, with even short-range missiles having the ability to wreak significant havoc and do substantial damage given the narrowness of the maritime area. In another example of the potential ramifications of land-based political conflicts on maritime security, tensions between Iran and the United States prompted Iran to threaten to close the Strait of Hormuz. Given that millions of barrels of oil pass through this strait en route to market, such a closure would be disastrous to the global oil economy and for many energy markets internationally. Amid these tensions, three vessels were attacked in the Persian Gulf in May 2019, and two further ships were attacked the following month. The United States blamed both incidents on Iranian or Iranian-allied forces, although Iran denied the allegations. In addition to presenting very real security concerns for vessels transiting regions around land-based political conflicts, then, such political conflicts also present the possibility of significant trade and shipping disruptions.

When such international conflicts create violence and disorder in impacted countries, they can generate a further prospective maritime threat by producing significant human displacement and migration. In some countries, seized by conflict, chaos, and war, citizens are compelled to flee to and seek shelter in other countries. The same conflicts can demand the evacuation of other countries' citizens from those war-torn regions – for instance, when the 2006 Lebanon War left thousands of Canadian citizens scrambling to return to Canada. Such evacuations often rely on vessels and marine transit, as they did in 2006. Economic collapses and uncertainty and climate change also drive populations to migrate and force their displacement. For many of these people, the process of relocating to rebuild their lives starts with stepping aboard a boat or ship. While perspectives on and perceptions of such migration vary – from being necessary humanitarian responses to prospective threats to national security – it is undeniable that the oceans are seeing increasing numbers of displaced migrants, as well as elevated human traffic generally. Although Canada has only been minimally impacted on a direct level by maritime migration, the migration issue has sparked significant political upheaval in many European nations, and the resulting instability is of definite concern to Canada as one of their key allies.

In addition to forcing human displacement and migration, climate change can also generate maritime threats to Canadian security. Indeed, as the Earth warms, it is expected that increasingly severe and destructive storms will come off the oceans, potentially creating life-threatening situations for those in the storms' paths. Furthermore, continued global warming also brings the threat of significant ice melt in Antarctica and Greenland. If this occurs, sea levels will rise significantly. This would be devastating for coastal areas, including some of the world's largest and most populous cities, with New York, Rio de Janeiro, Mumbai, Shanghai, Hong Kong, and Tokyo all at risk of being devoured by the sea. According to the United Nations, approximately 40% of the global population resides within 100 kilometres of the ocean, meaning that billions of people would be impacted and potentially displaced by such a sea level rise – including many Canadians. For Canada's Northern peoples, their proximity to the coastline brings a further threat from the oceans. Indeed, as climate change opens Canada's Arctic – and the Arctic generally – to further shipping, tourist cruises, and resource extraction, the escalating activity will bring with it a greater potential for environmental spills and serious accidents (particularly since the region

remains not fully mapped). This, too, could threaten and imperil the lives and livelihoods of Canada's Northern peoples.

With Canada's maritime security facing significant new and evolving threats, including from competing naval forces, piracy, criminal activity, international political conflicts that threaten adjacent shipping activities, rising sea levels, increasingly severe storms, and escalating human displacement, the question becomes how a nation can best address such hazards. For most of these threats, state forces – navies and coast guards – comprise the most effective response, serving to deter, dissuade, and repel other naval forces. As such, Canadian naval forces have participated with NATO allies in, for instance, counter-terrorism operations in the Mediterranean, counter-piracy operations off Somalia, and counter-drug operations in the Caribbean, the latter of which occur annually as part of *Operation Caribbean*. Canadian vessels have sailed to Asia to show the flag during freedom of navigation operations and to support United Nations sanctions against North Korea. They have also engaged in exercises seeking to redevelop and enhance the West's maritime warfare skills, after they were left to deteriorate in the wake of the Cold War. Such vessels and naval forces are moreover critical components of natural disaster responses, enabling the transport of greater quantities of essential equipment – at more efficient costs – than by airplane. Their ability to operate without accommodation and shore facilities, which may be in otherwise short supply following a disaster, is of further value during such responses. Overall, conflict and disorder on international waters impact – or at least, have the potential to impact – all Canadians, regardless of whether they reside along the coast or inland. There are a variety of potential threats to Canada and Canadians coming from the sea, and Canada's construction and maintenance of a capable and multifaceted naval fleet will be key to its capacity to contend with and address such threats in the years to come.

---

## References

<sup>1</sup> Geoffrey Morgan, "OPEC Oil Comes Roaring Back into Canada: Cartel Supplies a Third of Imports, Displacing U.S. Shale," *Financial Post*, February 21, 2017, <https://business.financialpost.com/commodities/energy/opec-oil-exports-to-canada-rebound-in-2016-as-u-s-producers-look-for-new-markets>.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, Ronald O'Rourke, Congressional Research Service, "China Naval Modernization: Implications for U.S. Navy Capabilities – Background and Issues for Congress," May 21, 2018, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/RL33153.pdf>; Alex Hempel, "The Rise of the People's Liberation Army Navy: Chinese Naval Modernization from 1990 to 2018," *WhiteFleet.net*, March 25, 2018, <https://whitefleet.net/2018/03/25/the-rise-of-chinas-peoples-liberation-army-navy-modernization-from-1990-to-2018/>; David Tweed and Adrian Leung, "How China's Growing Naval Fleet is Shaping Global Politics," *Bloomberg*, May 31, 2017, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2017-05-31/china-s-growing-naval-might-challenges-u-s-supremacy-in-asia>; "Russian Navy to Accept 19 New Warships for Service by Year End," TASS, Russian News Agency, July 10, 2018; and "The Navy Has Already Received 12 Warships and Combat Boats Since the Beginning of this Year," *Military & Defense*, July 10, 2018.

<sup>3</sup> Takahashi Kosuke, "China's 3rd Aircraft Carrier, the Fujian, Begins Its Maiden Sea Trial," *The Diplomat*, May 2, 2024, <https://thediplomat.com/2024/05/chinas-3rd-aircraft-carrier-the-fujian-begins-its-maiden-sea-trial/>; J. Michael Dahm and Peter W. Singer, "China's Latest Aircraft Carrier is Much More Than a Big Ship," *Defense One*, June 6, 2024, <https://www.defenseone.com/ideas/2024/06/chinas-latest-aircraft-carrier-much-more-big-ship/397188/>.