IFRI
MEMOS

Center for Asian Studies



NOVEMBER 2, 2026

Canada in the Indo-Pacific

Sustaining the Pivot, Partnering with France

Jonathan BERKSHIRE MILLER

Key Takeaways

- Canada's 2022 Indo-Pacific Strategy represents the country's most ambitious and integrated regional commitment. However, strategic diffusion across 24 initiatives and 17 departments risks limiting real-world impact.
- A structural tension runs through Canadian strategy: the Carney government's cautious economic re-engagement with China alongside deepening security partnerships with countries that regard Beijing as a principal strategic threat, is coherent in theory but operationally unstable.
- France is one of Canada's most natural Indo-Pacific partners in Europe: a resident power with territorial sovereignty, prepositioned military forces, and the institutional reach of the French Development Agency. Yet the bilateral partnership has remained largely declaratory.
- This paper makes the case for a concrete Franco-Canadian partnership agenda across four operational domains—maritime security, critical minerals, Pacific Islands development, and institutional coordination—and offers recommendations.

Introduction

Since the launch of Canada's inaugural Indo-Pacific Strategy (IPS) in November 2022, Ottawa has moved—with notable but uneven momentum—from the margins of regional engagement to a position of growing strategic visibility. The Strategy, backed by an initial $2.3 billion five-year investment, reflects a long-overdue recognition: Canada is a Pacific nation whose prosperity and security are inextricably linked to the stability of the world's most economically and strategically consequential region.

However, despite these positive strides, there is still a worry that Canada remains an episodic player in the region. Moreover, it is important to situate Canada's Indo-Pacific engagement within the broader argument, articulated with unusual bluntness by Prime Minister Mark Carney at Davos in January 2026, that middle powers must build coalitions of purpose if the rules-based international order is to survive the pressures of great-power rivalry.

While the IPS has achieved some important things through its comprehensive approach, greater achievements could be reached by recalibrating it into a set of priorities. In addition, Canada's growing engagement in the Indo-Pacific is providing some opportunities for coordination with France. Canada and France—two resident or near-resident Indo-Pacific powers with closely aligned strategic philosophies—have not yet fully seized the partnership dividend available to them.

Franco-Canadian cooperation in the Indo-Pacific can accelerate in several areas: spanning maritime security, critical minerals, development assistance in the Pacific Islands, and institutional coordination. In a world of weaponized interdependence and retreating multilateral governance, middle-power solidarity is not sentiment—it is strategy.

Canada rediscovers its Pacific identity

To appreciate the significance of the 2022 Strategy, it is necessary to understand how long Canada remained on the margins of Indo-Pacific engagement. Despite its Pacific coastline, close economic ties, a substantial diaspora from across the region, and long-standing membership in the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Regional Forum (ARF), successive Canadian governments defaulted to an "antiquated trade-first" approach. The security dimension of regional engagement was underprioritized, strategic investment in diplomatic capacity in the region was inadequate, and Canada's identity as a Pacific nation was regularly asserted but rarely operationalized.

The COVID-19 pandemic helped accelerate an already acknowledged need to rethink Canada's role in the region. Supply chain disruption exposed the risks of over-concentration in a single trade relationship—primarily the United States (US)—and the

vulnerabilities created by excessive economic dependence on China in strategic sectors. In parallel, China's increasingly assertive behavior in the South China Sea, its campaign against democratic freedoms in Hong Kong, its military pressure on Taiwan, and its economic coercion of Australia and in Europe made clear that security and economics in the Indo-Pacific were inseparable dimensions of a single strategic challenge.

> Canada has long remained on the margins of Indo-Pacific engagement

The 2022 Strategy, developed under the Trudeau government and now embedded in the Carney government's foreign policy architecture, represents the most ambitious and integrated statement of Canadian intent toward the region in the country's history: it spans seventeen federal departments and agencies and is backed by a whole-of-society approach that engaged provincial governments, the private sector, universities, and diaspora communities.

Since the development of the strategy, there have been evaluations of its impact and an official series of parliamentary committee hearings to discuss the possible update to the Strategy, which was released at the onset of Russia's large-scale invasion of Ukraine and also ahead of the election of US President Donald Trump for a second term in 2024.

Five pillars, one objective

Canada's Indo-Pacific Strategy is built around five non-ordered strategic pillars, each reflecting both a genuine national interest and a contribution to regional stability. The strategy is also a funded one, which is rare by Canadian standards—and has a ten-year horizon (with the first five years funded until 2028 at $2.3 billion CAD).[1] Understanding these objectives—and the sometimes-uncomfortable tensions between them—is essential for European partners seeking to engage with Canada in the region.

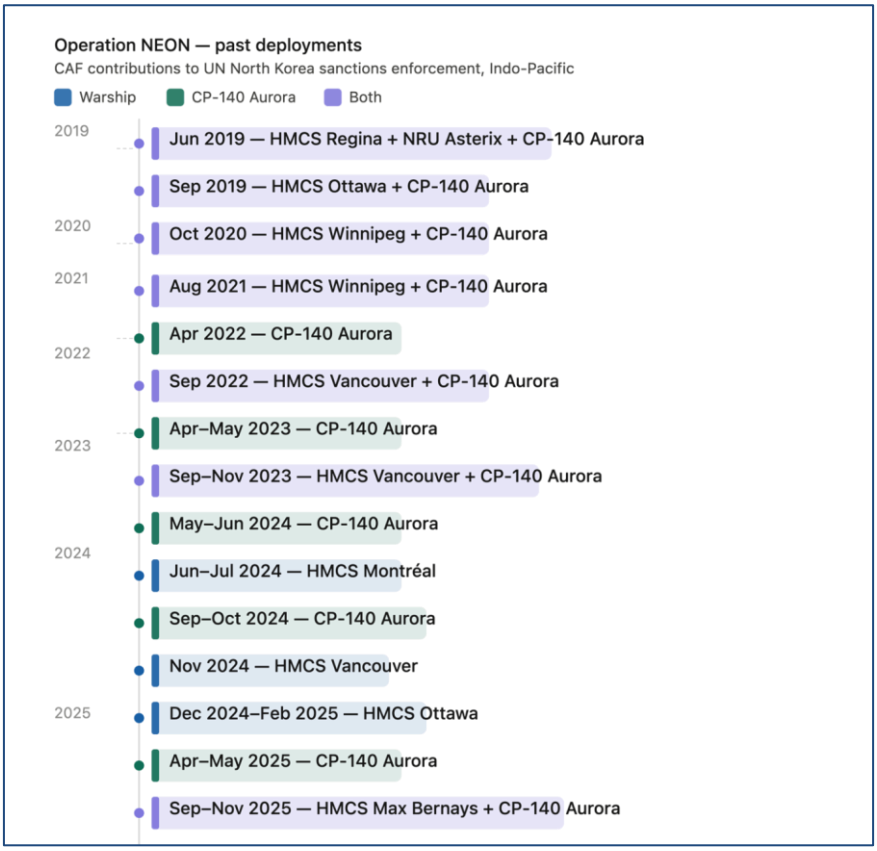
Peace, resilience, and security

The security pillar, the most resource-intensive, received over $720 million of the Strategy's initial five-year envelope, including $492.9 million for enhanced defense contributions. Its centerpiece is a sustained naval presence in the region, most visibly through Operation Neon—the enforcement of United Nations (UN) sanctions against North Korea—and Operation Horizon, Canada's bilateral naval cooperation with Japan. These deployments[2]—typically conducted by Halifax-class frigates and, for Operation Neon, supplemented by Aurora maritime patrol aircraft operating from Japan—are more

1. "Joint Statement: Canada-Republic of Korea Foreign and Defence (2+2) Ministerial Meeting", Global Affairs Canada, February 25, 2026, available at: www.canada.ca.
2. "Canada's Indo-Pacific Strategy, 2022-2023 Implementation Update", Global Affairs Canada, available at: https://international.canada.ca.

than symbolic. In a region where the rules-based maritime order is contested, the sustained physical presence of like-minded states carries genuine strategic weight.[3]

Operation NEON (2019-2025)



Source: "Operation NEON", Government of Canada, Department of National Defence.

Canada has also been building its bilateral security architecture at an accelerating pace. The Canada-Japan Equipment and Technology Transfer Agreement, signed in January 2026, opens the door to defense-industrial collaboration and establishes Japan as Canada's anchor partner in Northeast Asia. With South Korea, which faces fewer constitutional constraints on defense exports, procurement conversations have already advanced to discussions around submarines and major naval platforms. In Southeast Asia, the November 2025 Status of Visiting Forces Agreement with the Philippines—one of the fastest-moving defense relationships in Canada's Indo-Pacific portfolio—creates a framework for rotational military presence and joint exercises in one of the region's most contested maritime spaces.

Cyber security has also emerged as a critical domain. Canada has deployed dedicated cyber *attachés* across the region and is investing in capacity-building with regional partners—a recognition that the grey zone competition playing out in the Indo-

3. "Operation NEON", Government of Canada, Department of National Defence, available at: www.canada.ca.

Pacific has a significant digital dimension that conventional military engagement alone cannot address. An example of this is Canada's major partnership between BlackBerry and the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission and the Cybersecurity Center of Excellence in Cyberjaya.[4]

Trade diversification and supply chain resilience

The economic pillar of the Strategy reflects Canada's dual imperative: diversifying away from dependence on the US and reducing exposure to Chinese economic coercion. Ottawa has established new Trade Gateways in Southeast Asia, launched Team Canada trade missions to Singapore, Japan, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, South Korea, and Vietnam, and appointed Canada's first Indo-Pacific Trade Representative.

The centerpiece of the long-term economic vision is Canada's participation in the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), which provides market access across 11 countries including Japan, Vietnam, and Singapore. Critical minerals—of which Canada possesses world-class reserves of lithium, cobalt, nickel, copper, and rare earth elements—figure prominently in the strategy's economic rationale. The 2023 Canada-Japan Critical Minerals Cooperation Agreement[5] represents the most concrete achievement on this front, positioning Canada as a preferred supplier to Japanese industry in the clean energy transition.

The centerpiece of the long-term economic vision is Canada's participation in the CPTPP

The tension at the heart of the economic pillar is well understood in Ottawa, even if not always publicly acknowledged. The Carney government has sought to re-engage economically with China—including a January 2026 agreement permitting up to 49,000 Chinese electric vehicles into Canada at reduced tariff rates[6]—while simultaneously deepening security partnerships with countries that view China as a principal strategic threat. However, achieving this balance is easier said than done. Indeed, Beijing explicitly links economic statecraft and national security for its own interests, and Canada's two-track approach will prove harder to pull off in practice than official statements sometimes suggest. This is also creating friction in relations with Japan, and managing this tension honestly, rather than papering over it, is one of the defining challenges of Canadian statecraft in the years ahead.

4. "UNIDIR Builds National Cyber Resilience in Malaysia", UNIDIR, available at: unidir.org.
5. "Memorandum of Cooperation between the Department of Industry of Canada, the Department of Natural Resources of Canada, the Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development of Canada and the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry of Japan, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan concerning Battery Supply Chains", Government of Canada, available at: www.international.gc.ca.
6. S. Chase, "Canada on Track for Increased Low-Tariff Chinese EV Imports, Joly Says", *The Globe and Mail*, June 22, 2026, available at: www.theglobeandmail.com.

People, connectivity, and soft power

Canada possesses a form of soft power in the Indo-Pacific that no strategy document can create but that a coherent strategy can amplify. Nearly one in five new Canadians originates from the region; approximately 18% of Canadian citizens have family connections there; and some 60% of international students in Canada come from Indo-Pacific countries. These human ties constitute an organic basis for deep bilateral relationships that Canada's competitors cannot easily replicate.

The Strategy has sought to operationalize this asset through investment in visa processing capacity in New Delhi, Chandigarh, Islamabad, and Manila, and through expanded scholarship and educational exchange programs.[7] These investments are both strategically sensible and, frankly, overdue: Canada's visa processing failures had become a reputational liability across the region, and the backlog in student visa approvals had meaningfully damaged bilateral relationships with India in particular.

Climate and sustainable development

The Indo-Pacific produces over half of global greenhouse gas emissions while containing many of the countries most existentially vulnerable to climate change. Canada's Strategy commits $1.6 billion in existing development assistance to the region, supplemented by new investments in clean technology partnerships and critical minerals cooperation framed explicitly around the clean energy transition. In the Pacific Islands—where climate change threatens the sovereignty and habitability of small island states—Canada has a modest development presence and a genuine interest in demonstrating that it is a reliable partner rather than a fair-weather interlocutor.[8]

Diplomatic engagement and strategic partnership

The fifth pillar—the diplomatic framework that gives coherence to the others—has produced some of the Strategy's most durable early achievements. The elevation of Canada-ASEAN relations to a Strategic Partnership in 2023 was a genuinely significant step, opening new channels of political and economic engagement after 46 years of dialogue-partner status. Canada's appointment of a Special Envoy for the Indo-Pacific and the expansion of diplomatic representation across the region signal institutional commitment, even if the pace of diplomatic build-up has been constrained by resource pressures and bureaucratic bandwidth.

7. "Indo-Pacific Scholarships and Fellowships", Global Affairs Canada, available at: www.international.gc.ca.
8. "Canada–World Bank Clean Energy and Forests Climate Facility", World Bank, May 2026, available at: www.worldbank.org.

Achievements and remaining gaps

Three years into implementation, the Indo-Pacific Strategy has produced genuine and tangible gains. Yet, a fair accounting must also acknowledge where delivery has fallen short of ambition. The Asia Pacific Foundation of Canada, which has tracked the Strategy's implementation closely, has noted the challenge of translating a comprehensive list of activities into genuine strategic influence. The scheduled expansion of Canada's diplomatic missions across the region has proceeded more slowly than intended. Resource pressures, compounded by the sustained demand on the foreign ministry of managing the complex relationship with the US under successive administrations, have constrained the pace of institutional build-up. And while the CPTPP provides a durable platform for market access, the major bilateral trade agreements that would demonstrate transformative economic impact—with India and Indonesia above all—remain incomplete.

The Indo-Pacific Strategy has produced genuine and tangible gains

Looking ahead, the priorities for the next phase are clear. There is no intention to create a new strategy, but it is undergoing reviews and updates. Canada needs to sharpen the strategic logic of its engagement: move from comprehensive to concentrated; identify the partnerships and sectors where Canadian investment can have the greatest leverage; and connect its Indo-Pacific strategy systematically to its relationships with European partners. It is on this last dimension that the potential for Franco-Canadian cooperation is most significant—and most underexplored.

A natural partnership: Canada, France, and Europe in the Indo-Pacific

The case for deepened Franco-Canadian—and more broadly EU-Canadian—cooperation in the Indo-Pacific is grounded in substance rather than sentiment. Both are committed to the freedom of navigation and overflight that underpins the maritime-based trade on which their economies depend. And both have championed multilateral institutions and middle-power coalitions as the appropriate vehicle for managing a world in which the unilateral preferences of great powers increasingly dominate.

France's position as a genuine resident power in the Indo-Pacific—with overseas territories in both the Indian and Pacific Oceans, one of the world's largest Exclusive Economic Zones, and a prepositioned military presence that no other European country can match—gives the France-Canada partnership a distinctively operational character. This is not merely a bilateral relationship for exchanging views: it is a partnership between two states with physical presence in the region, the capacity to project military force, and concrete interests in regional stability.

The 2024 Canada-France Declaration on a Stronger Defense and Security Partnership explicitly identified the Indo-Pacific as a domain for active cooperation, particularly on multilateral exercises. Canada's growing participation in the North Pacific Arctic and its developing partnerships with Japan, South Korea, and the Philippines create potential for three-way and multilateral cooperation with France in theatres—particularly the South China Sea and the Pacific Islands—where coordinated engagement from trusted middle powers could be more effective than either country acting alone.

Maritime security: from parallel presence to joint operations

Maritime security is the most immediate and operationally promising domain for Franco-Canadian cooperation. Both countries conduct regular naval deployments in the Indo-Pacific asserting their freedom of navigation rights; both have contributed to multilateral operations enforcing UN sanctions on North Korea. The logical next step is to move from parallel bilateral presences to coordinated, and where appropriate, joint operations.

Maritime security is the most promising domain for Franco-Canadian cooperation

France's carrier strike group deployments in the Indo-Pacific—most recently Mission Clémenceau in 2025—have demonstrated the value of French naval presence as a "coalition aggregator" that brings together regional navies for joint exercises and demonstrates European commitment to the rules-based maritime order. Canada, with its growing naval presence in the Western Pacific and its emerging partnerships with the Philippines and Indonesia, is a natural partner for coordinated exercises, maritime domain awareness operations, and capacity-building programs with Southeast Asian navies that face Chinese coercion daily.

Canada has conducted multiple transits of the Taiwan Strait alongside allies, reinforcing support for freedom of navigation and the rules-based international order, and has also coordinated naval activities with partners including the US, Japan, Australia, and increasingly the United Kingdom. Building on this foundation, Ottawa and Paris could institutionalize coordinated patrols and presence operations, conduct combined maritime domain awareness and intelligence-sharing missions, cross-deck personnel on major deployments, and integrate anti-submarine warfare, air defense, and logistics during multinational exercises such as RIMPAC and La Pérouse.

Moreover, this cooperation should not overlook the North Pacific dimension. Russian and Chinese ambitions in the Arctic and North Pacific create security risks that neither Canada nor European partners have adequately addressed. Japan and South Korea are natural anchors for a North Pacific security framework that could include both Canadian and French participation—an underexplored dimension of the broader Indo-Pacific partnership.

Critical minerals: a trilateral strategic opportunity

Perhaps the most concrete near-term opportunity for EU-Canadian cooperation in the Indo-Pacific lies in critical minerals. Canada possesses world-class reserves of the lithium, cobalt, nickel, copper, and rare earth elements that European industry requires for the clean energy transition and the digital economy. The Indo-Pacific, meanwhile, is home to major processing capacity, rapidly expanding clean energy markets, and significant additional mineral resources. China currently dominates global critical-mineral processing to a degree that poses systemic risks to supply chain resilience across the Western world.

A trilateral framework linking Canadian and Indo-Pacific mineral extraction, as well as European processing and manufacturing expertise, would create genuine supply chain resilience against Chinese leverage—and would do so in a manner consistent with development goals in mineral-rich Indo-Pacific states. The CPTPP-CETA linkage that Canadian analysts have proposed as a platform for this cooperation aligns directly with the European Union (EU)'s own Critical Raw Materials Act and its broader strategy for supply chain de-risking.

Pacific Islands: coordinating for greater impact

In the Pacific Islands, where China has been expanding its diplomatic and economic presence, coordinated engagement by Canada and France offers the potential for significantly greater impact than either country's bilateral programs can achieve independently. France's overseas territories and the French Development Agency (AFD) provide a unique platform of institutional presence and local credibility. Canada's substantial development assistance envelope and its relationships with Pacific Island Forum members provide complementary reach. For decades, Canada has cultivated goodwill across the Pacific through investments in climate resilience, governance, education, health, and sustainable development. These longstanding partnerships provide Ottawa with diplomatic access and credibility that can reinforce security engagement, demonstrating that Canada's Indo-Pacific presence extends beyond defense to encompass a broader commitment to the region's long-term stability and prosperity.

Coordinated programming on climate adaptation, ocean governance, sustainable fisheries management, maritime security capacity-building, and digital connectivity would be more efficient and more strategically coherent than parallel bilateral efforts that sometimes duplicate activities and inadvertently signal fragmentation among like-minded partners. Pacific Island governments are sophisticated actors who notice when their partners coordinate and when they do not.

Institutional alignment: building the architecture for partnership

The institutional framework for Franco-Canadian and EU-Canadian defense cooperation is more developed than is often recognized. Canada is an active participant in the EU's Common Security and Defense Policy (CSDP) through a Framework Participation Agreement and is the first non-European country to join the Security Action for Europe (SAFE) defense fund. These connections create precedents and working relationships that can be extended into the Indo-Pacific theatre

Recommendations

The following recommendations are addressed to both the Canadian government, as it recalibrates its Indo-Pacific Strategy for its second phase, and to France and European partners as they consider how to deepen engagement with Canada in the region.

- Establish a permanent Franco-Canadian maritime coordination mechanism for the Indo-Pacific, building on the 2024 Canada-France Defense and Security Declaration. This should include coordinated schedules for naval deployments in the South China Sea and Pacific Islands, joint participation in multilateral exercises, and shared maritime domain awareness protocols.
- Launch a Canada-France-Japan Critical Minerals Trilateral, expanding on the bilateral Canada-Japan Critical Minerals Cooperation Agreement of 2023 to include French processing and manufacturing capacity. This trilateral should serve as the prototype for a broader CPTPP-CETA supply chain partnership.
- Develop a coordinated Canada-France Pacific Islands development strategy, consolidating overlapping bilateral programs into joint initiatives on climate adaptation, ocean governance, and maritime security. Canada's Pacific-focused development envelope and France's territorial presence and regional institutional relationships are genuinely complementary assets.
- Negotiate a structured Canada-EU Indo-Pacific Strategic Dialogue, modeled on similar frameworks between the EU and like-minded partners such as Japan, to ensure ongoing coordination of approaches to ASEAN engagement, regional security architecture, and rules-based order advocacy.
- Both Canada and France should coordinate their positions in multilateral forums—particularly the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and Pacific Islands Forum structures—to maximize the impact of their middle-power diplomacy. Minilateral frameworks can fill the void left by weakening multilateral institutions, but only when like-minded partners coordinate rather than duplicate their efforts.[7]

Jonathan Berkshire Miller *is an internationally recognized expert on security, defense, and geo-economic issues in the Indo-Pacific. He is a Senior Fellow of Foreign Affairs, National Defense, and National Security program at the Macdonald-Laurier Institute (Ottawa), a Senior Fellow on the Indo-Pacific for the Montreal Institute of Global Security, and a Senior Fellow on East Asia at the Asian Forum Japan. He is Canada's ASEAN Regional Forum Expert and Eminent Person (EEP). He was previously an International Affairs Fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations, based in Tokyo.*

How to quote this publication:

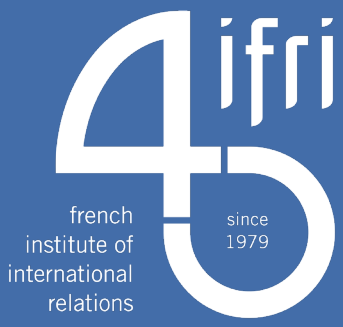
Jonathan Berkshire Miller, "Canada in the Indo-Pacific: Sustaining the Pivot, Partnering with France", *Ifri Memos*, Ifri, November 1st, 2026.

ISBN: 979-10-373-1291-4

The opinions expressed in this text are the responsibility of the author alone.

© All rights reserved, Ifri, 2026

Cover: © Shutterstock.com



27 rue de la Procession
75740 Paris cedex 15 – France

Ifri.org