

## *Introduction*

### **Canada and the Indo-Pacific strategic environment**

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#### **Abstract**

This article introduces the 'Indo-Pacific' nomenclature as a strategic political construct that is altering the socio-economic and geopolitical landscape. Home to both India and China, the term is being adopted by governments who see the region as holding both unparalleled economic opportunities along with deeply concerning security challenges. Yet the ascent of the 'Indo-Pacific' term is controversial and not all actors have bought into its promise. While the moniker has been favoured by both India and the United States, it has also been met with suspicion most notably from China. Indeed, many analysts consider the paradigm fundamentally designed by the West to counterbalance China's increasing influence in the region. Despite the controversy, the Indo-Pacific is an important term that more accurately captures and articulates the importance of a vast region that is strategically important for Canada.

#### **Résumé**

Cet article présente une construction politique qui modifie un paysage socio-économique et géopolitique: le terme « Indo-Pacifique ». Abrutant à la fois l'Inde et la Chine, le terme est adopté par de nombreuses gouvernements qui considèrent que la région offre à la fois des opportunités économiques sans précédent et des défis de sécurité profondément préoccupants. Pourtant, l'ascension du terme « Indo-Pacifique » est controversée et tous les acteurs n'ont pas adhéré à sa promesse. Bien que le surnom est favorisé à la fois par l'Inde et les États-Unis, il a également suscité des soupçons, notamment de la part de la Chine. En effet, de nombreux analystes considèrent le paradigme conçu par l'Occident pour contrebalancer l'influence croissante de la Chine. Malgré la controverse, « l'Indo-Pacifique » est un terme important qui capture et articule avec plus de précision l'importance d'une vaste région d'importance stratégique pour le Canada.

**Key words:** Indo-Pacific; Canada; Asia; China

**Mots-clés :** Indo-Pacifique; Canada; Asie; Chine

#### **Introduction**

On a brisk Sunday morning in November 2022, four of Canada's Liberal Party cabinet ministers meet in Vancouver to release the government's long-awaited Indo-Pacific Strategy. The 26-page document would be advertised as Canada's first substantive Asia-focused foreign policy in a generation. The document would be billed as a substantive framework for rethinking and navigating Canada's international relations in an increasingly complex global order that is heavily influenced by great power competition, ideological contestation, and a so-called 'Asian Century'.

A political construct, the 'Indo-Pacific' region is considered a highly strategic environment that will alter the socio-economic and political landscape on a global scale. Home to both India and China, the term is being adopted by governments who see the region as holding both unparalleled economic opportunities along with deeply concerning security challenges. Yet the ascent of the 'Indo-Pacific' term has been controversial and not all actors have bought into its promise. While the moniker has been favoured by both India and the United States,

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it has also been met with suspicion most notably from China. Indeed, many analysts consider the paradigm fundamentally designed by the West to counterbalance China's increasing influence in the region.

Despite the controversy, the Indo-Pacific is an important term that more accurately captures and articulates the importance of a vast region that is strategically important for Canada. And as Canada's Indo-Pacific Strategy (IPS) bluntly declares in bold wording, the IPS provides a roadmap for a 'once-in-a-generation global shift that requires a generational Canadian response' (Government of Canada, 2022, p. 4). And for good reason, the Indo-Pacific is a dynamic region of four billion people and home to \$47.19 trillion economy which is of vital importance for Canada's interests. For example, consider the following:

- By 2040, the region will be home to roughly 50 percent of the world's GDP
- The region emits 50 percent of global greenhouse gases
- Is home to 65 percent global population and 67 percent of indigenous peoples
- One in five Canadians hold family ties to the region
- Houses six of Canada's top trading partners

(Government of Canada, 2022)

But questions remain whether Canada is prepared for seriously engaging this region at a time when the rules-based international order has seriously been disrupted by global populism, trade protectionism and a catastrophic global pandemic that exposed the limits of global governance and international cooperation. The pandemic was especially brutal in the Indo-Pacific region as it ravaged economies pushing nearly five million people into extreme poverty while emboldening authoritarians (ADB, 2022).

These types of ongoing crises are very real and require a robust foreign policy approach that cuts across political divides beyond the lifespan of any one government. This is precisely what the IPS claims to do despite clear policy branding unique to Justin Trudeau's Liberal government such as Feminist International Assistance Policy among others. While future governments will likely tweak, rebrand, and imprint their own distinctive interpretation of the IPS, the principles and spirit of the policy must not deviate far from the framework's original intent to ensure policy consistency. And as we argue throughout this special issue, to safeguard this consistency Canadians and their elected leaders must have honest conversations on how to think of the nation's function and responsibility in a highly competitive Indo-Pacific environment.

Finding the right balance on how to navigate the region is difficult and there may be no singular approach. Flexibility and confidence will be key in coming to terms with contentious power dynamics beyond the control of any one Prime Minister. For example, Canada is a North American country whose largest trading partner is the United States. The socio-economic, strategic, and political history between Canada and Western governments are not to be dismissed. Canada is a founding member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the Bretton Woods institutions, and the Five-Eyes intelligence alliance. But at the same time, Canada's allies are economic competitors placing pressure on Ottawa to find its own independent foreign policy path.

As debate rages on how Canada should think about the Indo-Pacific, specific questions centered on building a foreign policy can strengthening the country's economic position. Voicing legitimate traditional security concerns while promoting civil society engagement

and maintaining a principled position on human rights in the region are pillars of what many Canadians see as genuine democratic values. What is clear, the world is driven by state self-interest and Canada must find a unique approach for clarifying its interests in Asia.

Yet the IPS is purposely broad and vague in its scope to leave room for policy adaption as the geopolitical dynamics of the Indo-Pacific evolve. The only consistent messaging in the text appears to be officially declaring China a principal concern for Canada. For example, the text mentions China 51 times and defines the country as an 'increasingly disruptive global power' (p. 7). By comparison, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) is referred to 22 times, India is referenced 19 times, South Korea 19 times, Japan 17 times, Taiwan 8 times, Australia and New Zealand are each noted five times, Pakistan has four references and Sri Lanka is mentioned twice. Strikingly, Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Maldives, Mongolia, Nepal, and Bhutan are not mentioned at all. Placing China so prominently within the strategy and omitting so many South Asian countries speaks to the purpose of this document.

On the one hand the move is calculated while speaking to Canada's national interests defined as opportunities. Everything from bolstering traditional security commitments through the Canadian Armed Forces (CAF) to providing greater incentives and tools for civil society groups and students. At the same time, firmly entrenched language of China as a 'disruptive power' admonishes the behaviour of Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) as a threat to the current international rules-based order. The language builds on years of criticism stemming from media reports that have accused the CCP of interfering in national elections, posing a security threat to the critical minerals sector, stealing intellectual property, infiltrating national research centers, and running illegal police stations.

At the same time, legitimate cybersecurity threats and intensifying techno-nationalism are driving multipolarity and supply chain de-coupling between China and the West. In many ways, these outcomes can be expected as the state further securitizes economic competition. The reality is neoliberalism promise of cheap markets and unraveled manufacturing allowed China to catch-up to the West. While the country is still a developing nation, its sheer economic potential power, modernizing military and authoritarian government structure has caused ultimate disruption to the international liberal order and Western economic supremacy. One prominent scholar has gone as far as labeling China-Western tension as a modern-day Thucydides trap which can increase the risk of violent conflict (Allison, 2017).

Of course, grand policy approaches that target China and elevate the idea of an 'Indo-Pacific' do serve a strategic purpose. The risk is that such an approach can also create a policy vacuum leading to internal contradictions which risk undermining the very clarity a policy document is designed to achieve. For example, human rights in the Indo-Pacific are highly problematic and pinning illiberal values solely on CCP is unhelpful and clouds the realities shaping the region.

Consider the hardline nationalist government in India, the military junta controlling Myanmar, the Cambodian government's sustained silencing of political opposition, continuous crimes against humanity committed by the Philippines in a so-called war on drugs, or the recent fundamentalist religious laws being imposed on Indonesians. Illiberalism and human insecurity are everywhere in the Indo-Pacific and the belief that China is the only regional country with human rights concerns is misguided.

There is no easy answer for the human rights policy challenge and Canadians must ask themselves if they can work with authoritarian regimes. Indeed, the Indo-Pacific is home to roughly two-thirds of the planet's population with most of these countries identified by Freedom House as either 'partially free' or 'not free' (Freedom House, 2022). This is likely the reason Canada dropped the 'Free' and 'Open' narrative for the Indo-Pacific which other countries continue to utilize. 'Free and Open' is simply inaccurate.

### **Politics of change and continuity**

Like many other Western liberal democracies, Canada has struggled to situate itself in a changing global landscape experiencing dramatic shift in political and economic power towards the Indo-Pacific region. Some writers have dubbed this era the 'Asian Century', a time of transformation that brings both unparalleled economic opportunities and deep security concerns as the US-led international order increasingly appears fragmented and vulnerable. Canada's pursuit in building a robust Indo-Pacific policy has had to grapple with Asia's changing strategic environment while balancing yet holding firm on liberal democratic values that have come to define the national identity.

Of course, Canada has struggled to find its place as a so-called 'middle-power' since the end of the Cold War. While successive Liberal governments of the 1990s under the leadership of Jean Chrétien, a human security approach would see Ottawa sponsor groundbreaking initiatives such as the Ottawa Convention and the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty. The shift towards a more traditional securitized policy environment brought on by the War on Terror that followed the 9/11 attacks on the United States would see Canada respond through military action in Afghanistan, and later joint operations in Libya and against ISIS.

While there is no question that Canada's foreign policy preferences are fully entrenched and in-line with the Western alliance, the politics of the post-Cold War environment has made it difficult for Canada to maintain its reputation as an 'honest broker' or peacekeeping nation. Nowhere was this made clearer as seen in the government's two failed United Nations Security Council bids. Politicians, pundits, and policy analysts scrambled to explain the outcome as Canadians struggle to come to terms with the fact that the country is no longer perceived as the balanced and pragmatic neighbour of the United States. Yet a series of global events and crisis is also to blame for Canada's seemingly diminishing reputation on the global stage.

The first two decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> century would see Canada pulled in multiple directions. For example, the complexity of ending the country's longest war in Afghanistan, navigating the global financial crisis, resisting the rise of populism, and working with emboldened nationalists in the United States continue to cause trade uncertainty. At the same time, Asia was catching-up and China's economy was experiencing hypergrowth. These push and pull pressures would lead to a sustained identity crisis and lack of policy confidence in how Canada should respond to increasingly insecure world. But it would be the arrest of Huawei CFO Meng Wenzhou on the behest of the Trump administration that ultimately exposed the vulnerability and inability of the Canadian state to protect itself from great power competition.

Decades of successive policy failures and governments inaction on how to remedy this identity crisis would aggressively play out in media and political circles. Columnists using

sharp and hyperbolic language reminiscent of dangerous Cold War rhetoric would take to the pages of major media outlets condemning government dysfunctionality. In fact, there remains an entire market of journalists and activists building careers on a policy vacuum that developed on account of leadership gaps across the political divide. It is here where our special issue takes its launching point.

### **Purpose of this Special Issue**

This collection has its origins in September 2021 symposium entitled ‘Canada and the Indo-Pacific Strategic Environment’ at Thompson Rivers University which brought together twenty experts deeply concerned about the challenges facing Canada as it looked to craft a meaningful and effective foreign policy in an increasingly complex and politically divisive environment. At the time, tension between Canada and China had reached damaging heights with the arrest of Meng Wenzhou at Vancouver International Airport and subsequent detentions of Canadians Michael Kovrig and Michael Spavor. Canada found itself caught in the middle of great power competition.

The symposium sought to identify under-researched areas of Canada’s political and socio-economic struggles as well as opportunity in the Indo-Pacific. The idea was to find blind spots in foreign policy thinking and shed light on these gaps in the Canada-Asia narrative. We therefore set out to try and find common ground and areas Canada can excel in with relations to the Indo-Pacific. We also hope to revisit many of the arguments laid out by Gary Wilson and Tracy Summerville a decade earlier in a special issue of CPSR (*Special Issue - Ports, Politics and the Pacific Gateway, Vol 2. No. 4*) that explored similar policy questions. Building on Wilson and Summerville’s work and drawing on agency theory, we hope to provide an update on what we see as significant policy concerns for Canada in the Indo-Pacific.

Agency theory provides a valuable function when considering how Canadian foreign policy is perceived and operationalized in the Indo-Pacific. Besley (2006) sees agency as a relationship between actors. He notes, ‘At the heart of political agency models is the principal— agent relationship between citizens and government; the principals are the citizens/voters while the agents are the politicians/bureaucrats’. For Most and Starr (2015), agency theory looks at the constraints as being objective since opportunity may be a reflection of rising interests between actors.

For Wendt (1995), agents are independent of structure and the shared knowledge of actors provide diverse and unique perspectives. Therefore, there is debate on whether regimes are created out of the subjective choices by actors or are products of inter-actor relations that lead to objective outcomes. This raises the question on how state policy formation is adopted as governments interact within regimes each guided by a political identity already shaped through domestic agency.

For example, state actors such as Canada operating within a security regime such as the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) will be more inclined to work through partnerships with fellow member states since the organization advances a philosophy of consensus compared to other organizations whose outcomes are based on majority of votes such as the World Trade Organization (WTO). In this case, while both NATO and the WTO are intergovernmental structures, the environments they project require actors to think of unique strategies when working within each institution.

And as Giddens (1984) famously outlined in his definition of 'knowledgeability', "[e]verything which actors know (believe) about the circumstances of their action and that of others, drawn upon in the production and reproduction of that action, including tacit as well as discursively available knowledge" (375). In other words, there is a connection between power, choice, and human action. Action and inaction can be framed within the context of choice shaped by power thereby leading to multiple outcomes. Wendt (1995) and Giddens (1984) works serve as an important backdrop for framing how Canada's policy preferences in the Indo-Pacific can be understood as choices that have been influenced by the push and pull pressures of great power politics.

A final substantive agency theory framework worth noting is Bach, Niklasson and Painter's (2012) work which explores New Public Management (NPM) approaches to policymaking. They considering the concept of autonomy and the correlation between agent independence with supervising actors ('principals'). From this perspective, a focus on policy autonomy or the idea that an agent is compelled by their principals can help explain policy formation and possibly give insight into how China became such a prominent feature of the IPS document.

This approach is helpful for understating how a securitized concept such as the 'Indo-Pacific' was mainstreamed by Canada's security establishment (agents) and successfully convinced principals (and politicians) on how to think about Asia. And as agency special interests continue to influence the policy decisions of principals, those principals will likely be empowered and emboldened thereby to make authoritative decisions. These decisions by the principals are then directed back to agents which are then responded to by the principal's directive. Wendt (1992) referred to this as *altercasting* for explaining policy formation caught in a bureaucratic structure.

This collection therefore draws on the powerful concept of agency as it hopes to offer critical policy options for the Government of Canada to consider as it looks to operationalize the IPS. Authors were asked to identify key 'concepts', 'trajectories', and 'challenges' facing Canada as understood from their respected fields. As we see it, with the launch of IPS there has never been a more opportune time to refine, advocate and strengthen Canada's interest in Asia.

This special issue begins with the work of Victor V. Ramraj who served as an adviser to the co-chairs of the Canadian government's Indo-Pacific Advisory Committee and has written an article that explores the impact and influence of non-state actors and civil society groups throughout the Indian Ocean region. As the region becomes increasingly important during a time of increased great power competition, Ramraj points to the long histories of Indigenous, religious and civil society actors and how these groups shape political and diplomatic narratives. Ramraj then considers how Canada can plurilaterally engage with these groups as it looks to establish greater "people to people" connections.

This builds into Scott Harrison and Quinton Huang article on people-to-people connections through the long-term relationships established between Canadian municipalities and provinces. The authors argue that 'twinning relationships' can serve as an opportunity for building connections through paradiplomacies or what is referred to as 'other diplomacies'. They approach this largely understudied area within the broader context of the Indo-Pacific construct. They correctly point out the federal government's absence in providing a framework for provincial and local governments while offering the

first comprehensive dataset on twinning in the Indo-Pacific along with key opportunities for bolstering Canada's foreign policy.

Terry Kading and Aliasha Thomas then explore Canada's immigration strategy as a critical policy file gaining greater traction as it specifically ties to retaining immigrants and international students from the Indo-Pacific region. As Canada's workforce ages, Kading and Thomas point to the socio-economic benefits of migration as a government objective. Yet this is a highly competitive market and Canada will have to compete for talent with other advanced economies looking to expand their immigration programs. Moreover, there is intense domestic competition between provinces, universities and communities looking to attract and retain new arrivals. While there is broad government consensus on a need for attracting new migrants and international students, a lack of a clear framework on how to address several of the structural barriers exist. The article considers the implications, trajectory and policy challenges facing multiple levels of government and actors in the context of equity and capacity as migration from the Indo-Pacific takes on an increasingly important role.

Staying within the broader Indo-Pacific, Mark Williams and Selina Haynes then offer a careful overview of the history and impact of Canada's accession to the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC) with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). The authors point to Canada's unique position as one of only ten countries outside the region to be a signatory of TAC. They further trace Canada's long standing diplomatic relationship with ASEAN since the 1970s while outlining future trajectories, market access opportunities and challenges. At the same time, diversifying Canada's market interest as it looks to diversify away from China.

The collection then shifts to a series of case studies beginning with work of Robert Hanlon and Che-Hui Lien who consider Canada-China relations in an era of competitive pluralism. The authors specifically explore the business relationship which they argue requires urgent and pragmatic solutions at time of increasing bilateral tension. The article traces elements of the Canada-China bilateral relationship with drawing on the concept of social constructivism as a substantive framework for explaining a divergence in political and economic interests that are conflated with values. They see the Indo-Pacific as an ideational construct being shaped through ideological posturing and nationalist doctrine. They argue the business communities in both Canada and China must work to develop 'strategic and selective engagement' as they look to navigate an increasingly multipolar world.

Mary Hanlon and Taylor Brydger's work then considers the dynamics of 'fashion diplomacy' in the context of Canada's engagement with supply chains in Bangladesh. Investigating the fields of worker safety and responsible fashion, the authors explore the Rona Plaza factory collapse and the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic as watershed moments that required the Government of Canada to reconsider its bilateral relations with Bangladesh in the context of supply chains and the apparel industry. They argue Canada is well positioned to be a leader in responsible fashion and should develop inclusive policy and strategies to help guide policy makers and business actors in the Indo-Pacific.

The final article of this special issue brings in the work of Bala Raju Nikku, Bishwash Nepali, and Sanjeev Dahal who consider Canada's 'disaster diplomacy' efforts in response to the Nepal Earthquakes of 2015. The authors trace over 50 years of historical bilateral relations between Canada and Nepal while examining how the earthquakes influenced a response from Canadian Nepalis while increasing a visible awareness of the community

within the broader South Asian diaspora. As the authors demonstrate, Nepal as a case study provides valuable context for Canada's disaster diplomacy in the Indo-Pacific and South Asian regions. They conclude by identifying serious challenges facing Canada's efforts in the region especially in the realm of non-state actors which the authors see as offering little more than band-aid solutions and rhetoric.

## **Conclusion**

There is little debate that Canada's Indo-Pacific strategy was long overdue. It has also captured the non-partisan imagination while offering a promising direction to clarify our future foreign policy for this critical region. But this is only the beginning of the dialogue as inherent contradictions in balancing economic self-interest with democratic values will prove complicated. Indeed, Canadians must remember that even our closest allies are economic competitors in this region and there is no consensus on the rules of the Indo-Pacific game. At the same time, there is a danger that the Indo-Pacific narrative gets captured into similar hegemonic thinking of 'the West vs. the rest'

And while the Indo-Pacific strategy has both long term and short-term objectives, it also brings challenges with opportunities. Its roots are grounded in traditional security doctrine and a purpose to counterbalance China's rise. While there is a growing critical mass of governments supporting the concept of 'Indo-Pacific', this should not be conflated with tacit support for Western-led interests in Asia. Indeed, there are good reasons why non-Western and illiberal governments would support Indo-Pacific language on account of their own foreign policy self-interest.

In the end, an advantage of the IPS policy document is its clever flexibility as it allows the government room to communicate security concerns through hard power language and strategic commitments while advocating softer approaches for people-to-people ties through economic opportunity and humanitarian efforts. At the same time, the risk of conflating key statecraft mechanisms such as diplomacy, development, trade, and security must be resisted. Despite the genuine foreign policy overlap of these tools, they must remain independent and not securitized by the state.

As we argue in this collection, there has never been a more important time to think carefully through important foreign policy objectives. We hope that this volume can offer the reader new insight for thinking through policy gaps that we believe have often been overly securitized, ignored, or forgotten in the mix of great power competition. What is clear and as we hope to show in this work, finding new ways for engaging the Indo-Pacific through inclusive human or non-traditional security approaches will define Canada's success in Asia.

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