

Conclusion

Canada's Prospects in the Indo-Pacific

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Abstract

As Canada looks to strengthen its presence in Asia, the government's Indo-Pacific Strategy (IPS) provides an important framework for guiding grand narratives on policy. Yet the document's broad language raises questions around its pragmatism and how the strategy can be operationalized. To do so, Canada must work at bringing new ideas, be regionally present, and show solidarity with people of Asia. The government's work must not digress into a one-way dialogue more concerned with preaching Canadian values and interests. Rather, there is a foreign policy imperative for listening to the diverse voices of regional stakeholders since Canada needs the Indo-Pacific more than the Indo-Pacific needs Canada.

Résumé

Alors que le Canada cherche à renforcer sa présence en Asie, la Stratégie indo-pacifique (IPS) du gouvernement fournit un cadre important pour orienter les grands récits politiques. Pourtant, le langage général du document soulève des questions quant à son pragmatisme et à la manière dont la stratégie peut être opérationnalisée. Pour ce faire, le Canada doit s'efforcer d'apporter de nouvelles idées, être présent à l'échelle régionale et faire preuve de solidarité avec les peuples d'Asie. Le travail du gouvernement ne doit pas se transformer en un dialogue à sens unique davantage axé sur la prédication des valeurs et des intérêts canadiens. Il existe plutôt un impératif de politique étrangère consistant à écouter les diverses voix des acteurs régionaux, puisque le Canada a plus besoin de l'Indo-Pacifique que l'Indo-Pacifique n'a besoin du Canada.

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

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

As Canada looks to strengthen its presence in Asia, the government's Indo-Pacific Strategy (IPS) provides an important framework for guiding grand narratives on policy. Yet the document's broad language raises questions around its pragmatism and how the strategy can be operationalized. To do so, Canada must work at bringing new ideas, be regionally present, and show solidarity with people of Asia. The government's work must not digress into a one-way dialogue more concerned with preaching Canadian values and interests. Rather, there is a foreign policy imperative for listening to the diverse voices of regional stakeholders since Canada needs the Indo-Pacific more than the Indo-Pacific needs Canada.

To be sure, a flexible strategy can build diplomatic space between allies and rivals while carefully considering how policy may be leveraged for safeguarding Canada's competitive advantage. Innovative policy has never been more critical at a time where Paul Evans (2022) has warned Canada is seemingly abandoning its 'middle-power' identity as it looks to posture itself as a major player in great power rivalry. Mentioning China 51 times in the IPS document and defining the government as a 'disruptive power' will only lead to increased multipolarity in the region and beyond. And as many authors in this special issue have argued, counterbalancing political rhetoric to build space for socio-economic opportunities

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and humanitarian work will require creative efforts on a range of multitrack diplomatic fronts.

Operationalizing Canada's IPS must therefore incorporate both top-down and bottom-up dialogue between diverse networks. While a whole of government approach is vitally important it cannot be the only approach. Canada's IPS must not become an exclusive policy reserved for political elites and epistemic communities as this will undermine the spirit of the document which places significant emphasis on people-to-people ties. For example, as this issue of *Canadian Political Science Review (CPSR)* goes to production, Canada's policy elites are set to meet at luxury hotel in Singapore far removed from the many challenges and pressures faced by your average person living in the Indo-Pacific region.

But the gap between policy elites and communities can be minimized with meaningful engagement between civil society organizations, business actors, and the education sector. If Canada is committed to bolstering its presence in the Indo-Pacific, supporting grassroots multi-sector projects can be one low-cost approach for establishing deeper community networks with Asia-based stakeholders. This will require political fortitude for investing in new frameworks coupled with a sense of pragmatism on how to build Canada's brand.

Indeed, Canadians must reckon with the difficult question on whether to do business with human rights violators and governments with policy that conflicts with liberal democratic values. As the Canada's IPS notes, 'There are also countries in the region with whom Canada fundamentally disagrees; we must be clear-eyed about the threats and risks they pose' (p. 6). The concern here is that some of these threats can and do come from allies including trade partners such as the United States. Coming to terms with great power rivalry and the volatile relationship between the United States and China has exposed serious vulnerabilities to Canada's foreign policy. Indeed, Ottawa must be as 'clear-eyed' with Washington as it is with Beijing.

Politics aside, Canada's strength will be its people-to-people ties but stakeholders must not lose sight of empowering these very networks and find balance between the ideological opinions raging within Canada's borders on how to work and advocate national interests. A region of sub-regions, the Indo-Pacific is home to many actors accused of significant corruption, serious human rights abuses, dysfunctional institutions and increasing geopolitical hostility. Similarly, countries in the Indo-Pacific are experiencing both economic boom and underdevelopment, prosperity and poverty, seeing a growing middle class yet struggling with persistent and widespread human insecurity.

Such paradoxes were noted in a recent editorial published in the Jakarta Post by ASEAN's outgoing Secretary-General Dato Lim Jock Hoi who warned that the bloc was at a crossroads. Hoi writes 'This is because of the global and regional headwinds that impact the future of the ASEAN community, including problems like global trade tensions, climate change, digital divide and even the pandemic. Taken together, these challenges have exposed gaps or weaknesses in the ability of ASEAN to address some its goals such as participation in global value chains, enhancement of macro-financial coordination and narrowing the development gaps' (Hoi, 2022). Hoi's message captures the deeper complexities of just one of the Indo-Pacific's subregions and is emblematic of a domain that is home to sixty-five percent of the planet's population. How then should Canada respond?

While there is no straightforward approach for navigating the Indo-Pacific, this volume has brought together a collection of seven papers that have advocated Canada's people-to-people initiatives and not elite politics nor great power rivalry that will have the most impact

for gaining influence in the Indo-Pacific. Drawing on the concept of agency, contributors were asked to discuss various approaches, drivers, and trajectories of Canadian foreign policy in the Indo-Pacific within the context of their respected research areas. All papers in this volume have pointed to the imbalance between the Canadian government's rhetoric compared to action and substance of policy. Each paper also called for a deeper and more meaningful approach to foreign policy relations in the Indo-Pacific.

At the same time, we have argued that it is important to tread lightly in the Indo-Pacific which requires an "all of government" response. Time will tell if the government's original promise of CDN \$2.3 billion investment can improve Canada-ASEAN relations, build connections with Indo-Pacific peoples, and the diaspora in Canada. The papers here communicate our concern for misguided policy, the securitization of society, as well as the risks of marginalizing groups leading to harmful narratives advanced by hardline ideological positions.

This volume began with Victor Ramraj's work exploring the impact of non-state actors and civil society groups in the Indian Ocean region especially concerned with the people-to-people connections and how Canada can plurilaterally engage these groups. This point is further discussed by Scott Harrison and Quinton Huang who map 'twinning relationships' between Canadian and Asian municipalities. The dynamics and questions around 'other diplomacies' and paradiplomacies are raised while pointing to the importance of bolstering relationships. Terry Kading and Aliesha Thomas then remind us that international students are not only an important economic resource but also the future of Canada's population trajectory, a major blind spot needing greater understanding from multiple levels of government. Meanwhile, Mark Williams and Selina Haynes discussed the Canada-ASEAN relationship while highlighting the critical importance Southeast Asia as the government looks to diversify its markets and grow its influence in the Indo-Pacific.

Moving to case studies, Robert Hanlon and Che-Hui Lien then considered the Canada-China business relationship as an important area needing 'strategic and selective' engagement policies in the wake of political tensions. They discuss the impact of ideological and value divergence within the context of principal-agent theory as actors navigate an increasingly contentious multipolar world. This is followed by Mary Hanlon and Taylor Brydges who explore complex supply-chain dynamics of the garment sector in Bangladesh in relation to Canada. They consider the politics of 'responsible fashion' while arguing the value of developing inclusive policy. Finally, Bala Raju Nikku, Bishwash Nepali, and Sanjeev Dahal discuss disaster management and diplomacy in Nepal pointing to the urgency of rethinking Canada's aid strategy while moving beyond band-aid solutions and rhetoric.

In the end, Canada's Indo-Pacific Strategy is a much-needed framework for rethinking policy approaches while creating space to develop new and innovating ideas. Mutual respect, inclusivity and sustainability must be situated at the core of any programming that falls under the IPS framework if Canada is to have a meaningful impact in the region. Political parties in Canada must also be mindful and committed to building programming that can survive the life of any one government in building trust with regional partners.

To be sure, Canada must continually reflect on its positionality as a rich North American country with a violent colonial past going through a difficult process of national reconciliation with Indigenous Peoples. If anything, this should remind policy makers of the importance for listening to the needs of Asia-based partners as the government seeks out new collaborations, partnerships, and alliance in the Indo-Pacific.

One of the greatest challenges is going to be navigating the diverse national debate on Canada's place in Asia. This includes finding ways to work with China in areas of mutual interest such as climate change, health, and food security. Canada must be ready to manage future risks brought on by great power rivalry as was the case with the arrest of Huawei CFO Meng Wenzhou and subsequent detention of Michael Kovrig and Michael Spavor. Planners must also find ways to counterbalance unhelpful narratives of economic self-interest, political oversimplification, and hawkish opinions through meaningful programming that advocates Canadian values while empowering and supporting partners.

Canada's prospects in the Indo-Pacific era are promising but the work is just beginning. What is clear is that the future is complicated bringing both opportunity and risk. But the greatest threat to Canada's IPS is complacency, elite policy capture and neglecting the people-to-people opportunities. And as this collection has argued, it is only through principles of human security, multitrack diplomacy, and sustainable development that Canada's IPS can have a meaningful impact in the world's most dynamic region.

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