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CANADA IN THE INDO-PACIFIC?

Stephen Nagy

SUMMARY

Canada needs to take a bigger part in the Indo-Pacific's development and support for a rules-based order or risk getting locked out of the region's economic, diplomatic and security benefits. Although the Indo-Pacific region is an economic dynamo, it's also institutionally underdeveloped and the source of numerous traditional and non-traditional security challenges. Traditional challenges include North Korea's WMD program and potential conflicts between China and neighbouring nations. Non-traditional challenges include piracy, illegal fishing and climate change. Conflicts, especially at sea, could disrupt communications, trade and energy flows.

Canadians know that much is at stake in Indo-Pacific region. A 2020 survey found that 83 per cent of Canadians believe that Canada should stand up to China when values like human rights and democracy are on the line. Opinions vary as to how Canadian engagement in the Indo-Pacific should look.

Any such process should be clearly and meaningfully articulated to garner buy-in from Canadians. It should also be based on a realistic assessment of the capabilities and capacities Canada can bring to the region. Canada has already used existing institutions, such as military exercises among Indo-Pacific nations, to get involved in the area.

Options include bringing together middle-power countries to promote multilateralism and non-military solutions to Indo-Pacific challenges. North Korean denuclearization, vaccine distribution and the digital economy offer possibilities to create a diplomatic consensus among like-minded countries. Outreach should also concentrate on issues directly affecting Canada and its allies, like forging coalitions to resist hostage diplomacy and economic coercion. At the same time, Canada must develop a constructive relationship with China to mitigate regionwide challenges such as climate change.

Canada shares an interest with the U.S., Australia, Japan and other countries in ensuring that the Indo-Pacific develops in a free, open and rules-based manner. A more Machiavellian approach founded on the presumption that might is right would see Canada and similar middle-power countries become marginalized and more vulnerable to security challenges. It's time for Canada to speak up and become more involved in the Indo-Pacific to prevent that scenario.

SUPPORTING A FREE AND OPEN, RULES-BASED INDO-PACIFIC REGION IS CONSISTENT WITH CANADA'S MIDDLE-POWER IDENTITY AND NATIONAL INTERESTS

The Indo-Pacific region stretches from North America to the west coast of India. Home to the Comprehensive and Progressive Transpacific Partnership (CPTPP), the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) and the Japan EU Economic Partnership Agreement, it is the engine of global economic growth.

Notwithstanding its economic dynamism, it is institutionally underdeveloped and has numerous traditional and non-traditional security challenges. Traditional security challenges include North Korea's development of weapons of mass destruction, and potential conflict in the East China Sea, Taiwan Strait, South China Sea and the Himalayan Plateau over territorial disputes. Non-traditional security challenges include, but are not exclusive to, piracy, illegal fishing and climate change.

Friction in the region, especially in the maritime domain, could plunge it into conflict, disrupting sea lanes of communication (SLOCs), global trade and energy flows. These could cascade into conflict, economic instability and widespread humanitarian strife without definitive support from Canada and like-minded countries for a rules-based, free and open order.

Importantly, without active participation in the order-building process, Canada risks being locked out of the region's institutional development, potentially prejudicing Canadian economic, diplomatic and security engagement there.

WHAT DO CANADIANS THINK ABOUT ASIA?

According to the 2020 Asia Pacific Foundation (APF) survey on Canadians' views about engagement with Asia, a "majority of Canadians (83%) feel that Canada should stand up to China as Canadian national values such as the rule of law, human rights, and democracy are on the line."¹ The survey highlights cyber-security, environment, climate change and public health as areas where Canadians view engagement as critical. The survey does not canvass Canadian views on the Indo-Pacific, a terminology that arguably has little recognition among ordinary Canadians.

HOW TO ENGAGE IN THE INDO-PACIFIC

A variety of Indo-Pacific strategies co-exists and they are often conflated with the former Trump administration's security-focused Indo-Pacific Strategy.² This misconstrues the historical roots of the Indo-Pacific which were laid by former

¹ Asia Pacific Foundation of Canada, "2020 National Opinion Poll: Canadian Views on Asia," November 25, 2020. Accessed February 1, 2021. <https://www.asiapacific.ca/publication/2020-national-opinion-poll-canadian-views-asia>.

² Jeff Reeves, "Canada and the Indo-Pacific: Diverse and Inclusive, not Free and Open," Asia Pacific Foundation of Canada, September 2020.

Japanese PM Shinzo Abe in 2007, speaking to the Indian parliament on the so-called “confluence of two seas.”³

A granular look at the various Indo-Pacific strategies reveals many visions. Japan, for example, uses the expression “free and open Indo-Pacific vision,” whereas the Germans use “Indo-Pacific guidelines.” Still others, like Australia, don’t have a specific strategy, but Australia has included the Indo-Pacific region in its 2020 Defence Strategic Update and 2020 Force Structure Plan.

Despite Prime Minister Justin Trudeau’s statement about a “shared vision for maintaining a free and open Indo-Pacific region based on the rule of law” during Abe’s visit to Ottawa in 2019, Canada is still developing its own Indo-Pacific vision.

Any sustainable and meaningful engagement in the Indo-Pacific will require an interests-based articulation of why Canada should move from an Asia or Asia-Pacific vision to an Indo-Pacific vision. This must be tangible to ordinary Canadians to garner buy-in and be fiscally feasible over the long term to be sustainable. It cannot, nor should not be at the expense of a constructive relationship with China, despite the current challenges that bilateral relations face.

An Indo-Pacific engagement must be based on a realistic assessment of the capacities and capabilities that Canada can bring to the region. Here, Canada can bolt in to pre-existing Indo-Pacific-focused institutions to lend its capabilities. We saw this in the Sea Dragon 21⁴ exercises in January 2021, when Canada joined Japan, Australia, India and the U.S. in Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (QUAD) exercises in and around Guam.

Similar bolting-in opportunities exist in cyber and digital trade co-operation, supply chain resilience and diversification, policy co-ordination on supply chain management and trade restrictions and non-traditional security co-operation with middle-power projects such as the Japan-Mekong Connectivity Initiative⁵ or Partnerships for Recovery in ASEAN and Southeast Asia Region.⁶

Bolting in co-operation in the Indo-Pacific would make Canadian engagement in the region more sustainable and meaningful but it is not the only form of engagement that Canada should explore.

Pro-active middle-power diplomacy promoting multilateralism and non-military solutions to Indo-Pacific challenges should be actively pursued. Diplomatic agenda building to co-ordinate diplomacy in the Indo-Pacific on an ad hoc and sustained level should be pro-actively engaged in.

³ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Japan, “Confluence of the Two Seas,” Speech by Shinzo Abe, Prime Minister of Japan at the Parliament of the Republic of India, August 22, 2007, <https://www.mofa.go.jp/region/asia-paci/pmv0708/speech-2.html>.

⁴ Staff, “Sea Dragon 2021 Kicks Off Between US and Partner Nations,” Commander, U.S. 7th Fleet, January 11, 2021. Accessed January 28, 2021. <https://www.c7f.navy.mil/Media/News/Display/Article/2468589/guam-hosts-partner-nations-in-exercise-sea-dragon-2021/>.

⁵ <https://www.mofa.go.jp/files/000176167.pdf>

⁶ <https://www.dfat.gov.au/countries/overview-australias-asean-and-southeast-asia-regional-programs>

For example, forming middle-power commissions⁷ to discuss issues facing the region such as North Korean denuclearization, vaccine distribution or digital economy regulation are a few areas that could bring a public good to the region. The precedent has already been set with the January 2018 Vancouver foreign ministers' meeting on security and stability on the Korean Peninsula⁸ but it needs to be regularized.⁹

Diplomacy directed at the Indo-Pacific should also focus on issues facing Canada and like-minded countries. Key examples include forging coalitions to protect against hostage diplomacy and economic coercion. Canada has already made progress by bringing together like-minded countries in the Declaration against Arbitrary Detention in State-to-State Relations.¹⁰

More of this kind of issue-specific diplomacy is not only necessary but provides Canada an opportunity to forge its own Indo-Pacific brand independent of the U.S., a critical characteristic to get Canada accepted as an Indo-Pacific stakeholder with its own interests, autonomy and vision rather than being seen as a mere junior partner to the U.S.

WORDS TO ACTION: CANADA'S INDO-PACIFIC VISION

Canada's middle-power identity and limited capacities will inform how we engage in the Indo-Pacific in a sustainable, meaningful and interest-based way. Canada can enhance its ability to achieve its interests in the Indo-Pacific by working with like-minded countries while developing its own independent Indo-Pacific brand.

Here, Canada shares enduring interests with Australia, Japan, the U.S. and other countries in ensuring that the Indo-Pacific is governed by a rules-based consensus rather than a Machiavellian "might is right" order. In such an order, Canada would be marginalized by more powerful states that do not share the same respect for rule of law, human rights and democracy.

Erosion of a rules-based Indo-Pacific order is not in Canada's interests. It would make dealing with traditional and non-traditional security challenges more complex. It would aggravate the challenges of dealing with global issues such as climate change, transnational diseases and development. The negative effects of this lack of co-ordination would not be confined to the Indo-Pacific region.

⁷ Jeffrey Robertson, "In Search of a Middle-power Rethink on North Korea Policy," The Interpreter, The Lowy Institute, November 25, 2020. Accessed January 25, 2021. <https://www.loyyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/search-middle-power-rethink-north-korea-policy>.

⁸ https://www.canada.ca/en/global-affairs/news/2017/12/canada_and_unitedstatestoco-hostvancouverforeignministersmeeting.html?wbdisable=true

⁹ Global Affairs Canada, "Canada and United States to Co-host Vancouver Foreign Ministers' Meeting on Security and Stability on Korean Peninsula," December 19, 2017. Accessed February 6, 2021. https://www.canada.ca/en/global-affairs/news/2017/12/canada_and_unitedstatestoco-hostvancouverforeignministersmeeting.html?wbdisable=true.

¹⁰ Global Affairs Canada, "Declaration Against Arbitrary Detention in State-to-State Relations," February 12, 2021, https://www.international.gc.ca/news-nouvelles/arbitrary_detention-detention_arbitraire-declaration.aspx?lang=eng.

Supporting a free and open, rules-based Indo-Pacific region is consistent with Canada's middle-power identity and national interests. It's time to turn statements into concrete action based on a long-term vision of Canada's interests in the Indo-Pacific and a strategy to realize those interests.

About the Author

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