
Reflections on Canada's Engagement with Asia

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INTRODUCTION

For many in Asia, Canada is seen as being huge, cold, far away and uninvolved in regional affairs. Arguably, they are wrong on most counts. They are right, of course, when it comes to Canada's geography. In fact, if we were to make a simple comparison we would find that Canada is thirty times larger than Malaysia. It is also inescapable that parts of Canada can become excruciatingly cold in the wintertime, but during the summer temperatures in many areas match those in Kuala Lumpur. If we consider the relative proximity of the ASEAN states, then Canada does seem far away, but the reality is that Indonesia is almost as long as Canada is wide and it is closer from Vancouver to Tokyo or Seoul than it is from Sydney to those capitals. But it is the last assertion – Canada's regional engagement – that is most subject to debate. There are those in the Asia Pacific region who ask "is Canada really part of the region?" This paper, seeks to address this question, and begins with an overview of the geographic, cultural and economic dynamics that have helped shaped Canada's vision of and involvement in the region.

¹ The views expressed in this paper are the author's alone, and do not reflect the policies of the Royal Canadian Navy or the Canada Department of National Defence.

THE CANADIAN CONTEXT

Canada is a trifurcated country, economically, culturally, and demographically. Leaving aside the long-standing First Nations residents, the bulk of the founding migrants in Canada originated from England and France. Thus, Canada is officially a bilingual nation although in practice it is increasingly a multilingual state. Until fairly recently, the majority of migrants originated from Europe and this accounts for the large Ukrainian and Italian communities in Canada.² Furthermore, Canada had powerful historical and constitutional ties with Great Britain, first as part of the British Empire and then as a self-governing dominion that continued to recognize the British sovereign as the head of state. These trans-Atlantic links were reinforced dramatically by Canada's contributions to the First and Second World Wars. In the case of the latter, Canada enrolled almost one tenth of its population in the armed forces and some would argue that the Royal Canadian Navy (RCN) was the key to the successful execution of the Battle of the Atlantic that ensured not only Great Britain's survival but the ability of the Allies to mount the D-Day invasion.

Canada's focus on anti-submarine warfare in the North Atlantic became institutionalized in 1949 with the establishment of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization or NATO.³ The RCN's pursuit of German U-boats shifted to the Cold War hunt for Soviet submarines. Canadian army and air force units came to be stationed in Europe and NATO commitments ensured that the East-West axis across the Atlantic reinforced Canada's original European roots.

At the same time, the newly established nation found itself being drawn deeper and deeper into the gravitational field of the US economy. It is worth reflecting for a moment on Canada's geographic

² See Government of Canada, "Backgrounder – facts in Canadian immigration," 2011, <http://www.cic.gc.ca/english/department/media/backgrounders/2011/2011-06-27.asp>

³ See Commodore (Ret'd) Kelly Williams, "Reclaiming Canada's reputation in anti-submarine warfare," *Vanguard Canada*, Dec/Jan 2015, <http://www.vanguardcanada.com/2015/05/16/reclaiming-canadas-reputation-in-anti-submarine-warfare/>

realities. Canada is the world's second largest country, but its population remains modest by global standards. Indeed, if we were to compare Canada and Malaysia we would find that Canada's population is only a fifth larger than Malaysia's (35 million vs. 29.7 million). Viewed from another perspective, Malaysia has a population density of approximately 85 people per square kilometre while Canada's population density is just under 4 people per square kilometre. The upshot, self-evidently, is that Canada is a huge country that is very thinly populated. What is more, it shares the world's longest undefended border with the world's most powerful nation. At the end of the Second World War the United States commanded upwards of half the global GDP and propinquity, common language, shared business practices, and a high degree of economic complementarity ensured that Canada became not only the United States' leading trade partner but Canadian trade dependency on American markets rose relentlessly over the years until, a decade ago, it exceeded 85 percent.⁴ Probably no other nation in the world was as trade dependent on another nation as Canada was on the United States. In this way, a second vector was forged; a north-south economic vector that focused Ottawa's attention powerfully on the North American continent and beyond, in more recent years, to Mexico and Latin America. One should not, of course, dismiss the vital economic links that developed after the Second World War with the European nations and then with the EU. These, as a recent Canada-EU free trade agreement suggests, were enormously important but they paled in comparison with the Canada-US links as symbolized by the North American Free Trade Agreement.

What then was the third vector, the one linking Canada with Asia? Despite nineteenth and twentieth century ties with Asia in which Canada imported labour from India to work in the forest industry in British Columbia and workers from China to assist in the construction of the trans-continental railway in the late 1800s, Ottawa, 4000 kilometres from the Pacific Ocean, remained largely myopic about

⁴ See James McBride, "The Future of U.S. Trade Policy," *Council on Foreign Relations*, 05 October 2015, <http://www.cfr.org/trade/future-us-trade-policy/p36422>

developments in Asia. Many have pointed to the way geography contributed to Ottawa's perceptions. The enormity of the Canadian prairies and the perceptual barrier constituted by the Rocky Mountains may have helped shape a Colombian world view that Vancouver was the end of the Canadian world. Whatever the case, Ottawa was very much a creature of the provinces of Ontario and Quebec; the former constituted the industrial heartland of the nation, immediately adjacent to its American counterpart, while the latter constituted a cultural and electoral region which no Canadian prime minister could afford to ignore. Appropriately, the great bulk of Canada's population occurred in these two provinces and for the entire twentieth century federal governments could survive fairly easily while ignoring the realities of what came to be known as "The West."

The Canadian demographic dynamic changed dramatically in the latter part of the century when migration from Asia began to match or surpass migration from the rest of the world. Canada was a highly attractive destination; safe, secure, democratic, well-to-do, and refreshingly devoid of a colonial history or ideological bias. For many, the United States was an even more attractive destination, but competition for entry into the United States was acute, the racial legacy was worrisome, and American foreign policies were controversial.

The impending takeover of Hong Kong in 1997 triggered a significant flow of migrants, particularly to Vancouver on Canada's west coast.⁵ While some Hong Kong migrants ebbed back to their natal city, they came to be replaced – and surpassed – by even larger numbers of migrants from the People's Republic of China, India, and the Philippines in particular.⁶ Roughly half of all Canadian immigrants originated out of Asia in the first decade and a half of this century and they altered the cultural and electoral complexion of Canada's major cities like Montreal, Toronto and Vancouver profoundly. The last

⁵ See Jackie M. Chan, "Assimilation of Hong Kong Immigrants in Canada", *The Pacific Economic Review*, 22 October 2014, <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/1468-0106.12079/abstract;jsessionid=451E32EB8FED580D9B00FA913F57541A.f01t01>, pp. 439-465.

⁶ See Government of Canada, "Backgrounder – Facts in Canadian Immigration," 2011, <http://www.cic.gc.ca/english/department/media/backgrounders/2011/2011-06-27.asp>

mentioned, in fact, is said to be the most Asian of any western city in the world with over 40 percent of its residents seeing themselves as Asian.⁷

Initially, this Asianization process was seen as a West Coast phenomenon that had little to do with established Canadian realities. But surely and steadily the five million new Canadian citizens from Asia began to transform the nation's economic and political calculus. This, in turn, was part of a larger – and historic – restructuring of Canada, both economically and electorally. While a significant number of Canadians noted the rapid shift in the world's centre of gravity from the Euro-Atlantic to the Indo-Pacific in the last quarter of the twentieth century, they failed to appreciate that Canada's own centre of gravity was moving westwards as well. This reality was underscored dramatically in the federal election of 2010 when, for the first time in Canadian history, the province of Quebec no longer played a king-making role. It was Ontario and the Western provinces that determined the outcome and returned the Conservative Party, headed by the Prime Minister Stephen Harper, to office.

CANADIAN FOREIGN POLICY

It was Prime Minister Paul Keating of Australia who famously dubbed his country the “lucky land.”⁸ One could argue that this appreciation is even more applicable to Canada. It is a nation without a history of revolution. It lies flanked by three enormous oceanic moats that rendered it almost impregnable militarily in the era before inter-continental missiles. It is luxuriously endowed with land, water, and raw materials. And it lies next to the United States, the most powerful military power on earth. Thus, Canada has always enjoyed the luxury of engaging internationally on an optional basis or at least this was the case until fairly recently when the forces of globalization drew Canada deeper and deeper into affairs far beyond its borders.

⁷ See Douglas Todd, “Vancouver is the most 'Asian' city outside Asia. What are the ramifications?” *Vancouver Sun*, 28 March 2014, <http://vancouver.sun.com/life/vancouver-is-most-asian-city-outside-asia-what-are-the-ramification>

⁸ Phrase originates in “The Lucky Country” by Donald Horne, 1964.

It is also important to note that there is a powerful secular missionary dynamic at work in the Canadian psyche. Since the end of the Second World War Canadians have tended to favour humanitarian endeavours, support for human rights, rule of law, international assistance, and involvement in a host of multilateral organizations like the United Nations, the World Health Organization, and the International Monetary Organization.⁹ As one Canadian prime minister wrote, we wanted to be “useful to ourselves through being useful to others.”¹⁰ There were, of course, stern realities that Canada chose to address and the Cold War in Europe and Asia saw Canadians spending upwards of eight percent of their GDP in the early 1950s on maintaining a very significant army, navy, and airforce. Subsequently, however, the steady advance of social programmes – health care, education, pensions and an array of social services – meant that the defence budget, the largest discretionary element in any Canadian government budget, shrank inexorably, despite reassuring rhetoric to the contrary that Ottawa was able to deliver more for less.

Central to post Second World War Canadian history was the phenomenon of peacekeeping.¹¹ Peacekeeping resonated with most Canadians. There was a feel-good quality about utilizing the Canadian military to ensuring global peace and good order but over the years the rather relaxed form of peacekeeping that had characterized Canadian involvement along the Green Line in Nicosia, Cyprus, in the 1970s, for example, or the International Supervisory Commission in Vietnam a decade earlier gave way to a troubling awareness that there was pitifully little real peacekeeping left to do. At best, the nation would be obliged to sacrifice blood and treasure peacemaking in countries that seemed to have little or no relevance to Canada. This was the message derived from the heart-rending peacekeeping mission to the Congo, headed by the Canadian general, Romeo Dallaire, and by Canada’s even more

⁹ For an overview of post-Second World War Canadian foreign policy see Costas Melakopides “Pragmatic Idealism: Canadian Foreign Policy, 1945-1995,” McGill-Queen's Press, 1998.

¹⁰ Taken from a speech by Louis St. Laurent in 1947, for web version of entire speech see <http://www.russilwvong.com/future/stlaurent.html>

¹¹ See Matthew Bin, “On guard for thee: Canadian peacekeeping missions,” Bookland Press, 2007.

violent involvement – though in a very different way – in the former Yugoslavia. As the bloom began to go off peacekeeping and as defence budgets were slashed savagely in the 1990s peacekeeping sank into the Canadian consciousness as a reassuring, though largely unrealized, mythology.¹²

CONSERVATIVE GOVERNMENTS

From 2006 onwards Canada enjoyed three conservative governments under the leadership of Prime Minister Stephen Harper. Harper and his cabinet set Canada on a new course; one that was at marked variance with the multilateralism and international engagement proclivities of preceding Liberal governments. Harper had never traveled outside of Canada before he was elected and the Conservatives had a parochial, small-town view of the world. They were suspicious of international organizations which they considered long on talk and short on action.¹³ Thus, multilateral activities that had enabled Canada, as a middle power, to leverage its way upwards into top-level fora, ceased to be the flavour of the day. Trade was what mattered to the Conservatives but, ironically, they failed to maintain amicable relations with Washington and they took a distinctively distant view of the emerging Asian colossus, China. In fact, as one observer noted, they saw the Chinese as ungodly communists with an appalling human rights record.¹⁴ This was hardly a formula for cordial engagement. Parenthetically, the rest of Asia was almost invisible to the Conservatives in their first few years in office. What matter, Harper declared was values. “I don’t think Canadians want us to sell out important Canadian values,” he asserted at the 2006 APEC Summit.¹⁵ Accordingly Harper met with the Dalai Lama and the Chinese,

¹² For a critique of Canadian defence spending in the 1990s see Gloria Galloway, “Hillier decries military’s ‘decade of darkness,’” 16 February 2007, <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/national/hillier-decries-militarys-decade-of-darkness/article20393158/>

¹³ For a critique on Canadian Foreign Policy under Prime Minister Stephen Harper see Mark MacKinnon, “Harper’s World: Canada’s new role on the global stage” *Globe and Mail*, 28 September 2015, <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/politics/harpers-world-the-past-and-future-of-canadas-foreignpolicy/article26542719/>

¹⁴ Anonymous, personal communication, 25 April 2008.

¹⁵ John Ibbitson, “The Big Break: The Conservative Transformation of Canada’s Foreign Policy,” CIGI Papers, no. 29, April 2014, p. 9, https://www.cigionline.org/sites/default/files/cigi_paper_29.pdf

noting that there was a Tibetan flag on the prime minister's desk, called Mr. Harper's conduct "disgusting."¹⁶

The lack of Canadian involvement in Asia was part of a curious phenomenon. Canada was fairly active in Southeast Asia in the late 1980s and early 1990s but then lapsed into what we might call the Rip Van Winkle era; an almost twenty year period during which domestic distractions and overseas commitments like the War in Afghanistan, deflected Canadian attention from Asia even though the importance of the region was becoming daily more compelling and incontrovertible.

The end of the Cold War meant that Canada made the transition from a world of lethal predictability to one of lethal unpredictability. 9/11 and its aftermath highlighted the way in which a fleeting unipolar "new world order" had given way to one of confounding complexity. Faced with dramatically diminished defence budgets, the intractable nature of the Afghan campaign, and the fact that Europe and the Middle East had a perplexing way of re-emerging again and again, whether in Libya, Crimea, or in Syria, Ottawa always felt that it had to dedicate its shrinking military resources to the Euro-Atlantic region in order to ensure stability in former Yugoslavia, to combat pirates off the Horn of Africa, or to respond to Russian aggression.

The moment of truth came in 2008 with the Wall Street meltdown. Suddenly, what had seemed enduring and reassuring seemed evanescent. The American economy, on which Canadians relied to an almost existential degree, was in desperate trouble. The auto pact, which had been a metaphor for the interlocking economies appeared to have feet of clay. Trade diversification became a matter of the utmost urgency and that meant, in a word, Asia. Thus, Mr. Harper and the Conservative Party, underwent a Damascene conversion. The Prime Minister, who had opined that Canadians didn't want the government to "sell...out [Canadian values] to the almighty dollar" came round through 180 degrees

¹⁶Ibbitson, p. 9.

and set off on a series of trade missions to India and China.¹⁷ The problem, of course, is that you can't turn up in Asia at the eleventh hour and consummate trade deals that you have long contemplated; a point made in a nuanced but inescapable way by David Mulroney, Canada's one-time ambassador to China.¹⁸ Be that as it may, The Wall Street meltdown, to paraphrase Dr. Johnson's celebrated words, concentrated Ottawa's mind mightily. It was clear that Canada had to look to its economic defences. There was a growing recognition of the need for engagement in Asia although, nominally, at least, the Conservatives were still dedicated to focusing their trade efforts on Mexico and Latin America. Furthermore, the Conservatives were desperate to balance the national budget, as much for electoral reasons as for ones of good economic husbandry. The upshot was that Canada entered what one might call the Potemkin era vis-à-vis Asia. Ottawa succeeded in mastering the rhetoric but there was disturbingly little substance when it came to engaging Asia.

One of the critical "distractions," if we may call it that, was the Conservative's fascination with and commitment to the Canadian Arctic. Traditionally, Canada had been seen, simplistically, as a nation girt by two oceans, but global warming presaged the very real possibility that within a few decades the Arctic Ocean would be largely free of ice and Canada would have a new oceanic frontier. The prime minister was particularly interested in articulating a northern policy and visited the high north annually, to observe a Canadian Armed Forces exercise called Operation Nanook.

The Canadian Arctic is a particularly challenging area to administer and defend. It is roughly 4 million square kilometres in extent with a population less than double that of Putrajaya. Distances are immense, infrastructure is inadequate, the weather can be brutal, and the exploitation of the vast oil and gas reserves alleged to lie beneath the sea can be excruciatingly costly and difficult. Fortunately, the

¹⁷ See "Canada, China should meet more often: Harper," *CBC News*, 03 December 2009, <http://www.cbc.ca/news/world/canada-china-should-meet-more-often-harper-1.783876>

¹⁸ David Mulroney, "Middle Power, Middle Kingdom: What Canadians Need to Know about China in the 21st Century," Allen Lane, 2015.

nations facing onto the Arctic Sea enjoy relatively cordial and constructive relations and the Arctic Council provides a venue in which the various states can address their mutual concerns about the environment, indigenous peoples, and the safety of maritime transport. However, what is important for our purposes, is that Ottawa's focus on the Arctic, complete with government mandated Arctic and Offshore Patrol Ships (AOPS), may have come at the expense of greater engagement in Asia. Clearly the defence and development of the Canadian Arctic is an entirely justifiable national priority (although the commitment appears to wax and wane over the decades). Nonetheless, critics of the Conservative government continued to lament the government's failure to engage Asia more actively.

It is critical to remember that engagement occurs in a vast number of ways and on many levels. Individual cities in Canada forged links with their opposite numbers in Asia, irrespective of what the federal government may have been doing. Provinces, like British Columbia, were at the forefront of exploiting trade opportunities in Asia. It is instructive to note that when the Asian financial crisis occurred in the late 1980s, 43 percent of British Columbia's trade was with Asia and only 4 percent of Ontario's was with Asia! Small businesses, academics, non-governmental organizations, and educational institutions were all developing ties with their Asian interlocutors even if Ottawa seemed to be looking the other way.

THE LIBERAL GOVERNMENT

In October 2015, The Liberal Party, headed by Justin Trudeau, the son of former Liberal Prime Minister Pierre Elliot Trudeau, came to power in Canada. Trudeau, the younger, had campaigned on the promise of re-establishing Canada's reputation as a nation that was involved internationally. "Canada is Back" was the electoral slogan¹⁹ although Canada had never really been truly absent; rather the Conservative

¹⁹ See Trudeau's comments following the Paris Climate Change Summit, James Fitz-Morris, "Justin Trudeau tells Paris climate summit Canada ready to do more," *CBC News*, 30 November 2015, <http://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/trudeau-address-climate-change-paris-1.3343394>

Party's distaste for international fora meant that Canada had forfeited a number of opportunities, (for example, rotating membership in the United Nations Security Council and membership in the ADMM+), to become more engaged internationally.²⁰

Prime Minister Justin Trudeau was quick to break the mould, embarking shortly after his electoral victory for the G-20 Leaders Summit in Turkey, and the APEC CEO Summit in Manila in November 2015. He also exploited an opportunity to reinvigorate ties with the United States which had become strained as a result of the White House's opposition to the Keystone XL pipeline which would have seen oil from the province of Alberta flow to refineries in the Gulf of Mexico. At the same time he dispatched his Minister of International Trade, The Honourable Chrystia Freeland, to New Zealand where she signed the Trans Pacific Partnership agreement on behalf of Canada in February 2016.²¹ Further, he instructed her to focus her department's efforts on developing Canadian business with India, China, and ASEAN. A month earlier, in fact, Ottawa had appointed Marie-Louise Hannon as Canada's ambassador to ASEAN²² and Canada had succeeded in establishing diplomatic representation in all ten member states; with the Canadian Foreign Minister, The Honourable Stéphane Dion, visiting Myanmar and Singapore in April of this year. Trade has always been a crucial priority for Canadian governments, although, as one retired diplomat observed, it was too easy with the United States. Far from diversifying and struggling with great distances, foreign languages, unpredictable economies and fierce competition, it was far easier for Canadian businesses to turn to the United States, where the commonality of language, commercial law, and procedures made trade comparatively easy. That is not to say that Canada did not trade with Asia over the years. In fact, Trans-Pacific trade surpassed Trans-Atlantic trade in 1983 and it is now 3.5 times as great. In keeping with this phenomenon successive Canadian governments have hailed Vancouver as

²⁰ For an overview of Canada on the international stage see Roland Paris, "Time to make ourselves useful," *Literary Review Magazine*, March 2015, <http://reviewcanada.ca/magazine/2015/03/time-to-make-ourselves-useful/>

²¹ Janyce McGregor, "Chrystia Freeland signs Trans-Pacific Partnership deal in New Zealand," *CBC News*, 03 February 2016, <http://www.cbc.ca/news/politics/freeland-tpp-auckland-signing-1.3431631>

²² See "Canadian's Ambassador to ASEAN's Message," *Global Affairs Canada*, http://www.international.gc.ca/asean/ambassadors_message-message_ambassadrice.aspx?lang=eng

Canada's Pacific Gateway and Vancouver was not only the site of many Canada Year of Asia Pacific functions in 1997 but the host city for the APEC summit in the same year.

However, the reality is that Canada has run a trade deficit (largely offset by trade surpluses with the United States) consistently with major Asian marketplaces like China, Japan, South Korea, and ASEAN.

Thus, in the period 2005 to 2014 Canada imported merchandise from ASEAN worth \$116 billion but exported only \$32 billion!²³ One of the problems is that while Canada is a big country it does not have big companies by international standards. Many of the small and medium-sized enterprises in Canada lack the deep pockets to stay the course while they establish commercial beachheads in Asia.

Furthermore, the lack of legal predictability and protection in some Asian markets is a major disincentive for modest-sized firms who cannot afford to risk the loss of their intellectual property.

One area, self-evidently, where Canada is "big" is the area of natural resources like potash, timber, coal and oil. Unfortunately, recent years have seen the energy sector coming under withering but sustained fire from the environmental community. Environmental activism appears to have accounted for the failure of the Keystone XL project. In addition, claims that the Alberta tar sands are "dirty" energy that will contribute substantially to climate change have resulted in an increasingly entrenched resistance to energy projects in neighbouring British Columbia, the province through which Alberta oil and gas must pass to reach tide water. Resistance from environmentalists and First Nation's communities has delayed pipeline projects for years and there is widespread public concern that a tanker spill, like the Exxon Valdez on the Alaska Coast, could damage the pristine coast of British Columbia irreparably. Whether such a spill would occur is a matter of debate. Whatever the case, despite backing by giant firms like Petronas, the northern pipeline project and its oceanic terminal continue to languish and Canada is falling farther behind in its efforts to meet energy demands of Asia. This tale of woe, of course, has been

²³For these statistics and other Asia-Canada statistics see Asia Pacific Foundation of Canada, "Canada's Export Trade Statistics 2000-2014" & "Canadians Import Trade Statistics," <http://theasiafactor.ca/ca>

exacerbated severely by the dramatic downturn in the global price of fossil fuels and Canada has lost the march on its Asian and Middle Eastern competitors.

One of the areas where Canada has been engaged with Asia over the years is in realm of naval diplomacy. This is entirely appropriate in view of the quintessential maritime nature of the Indo Pacific region. The intimacy of the relationship that exists between The United States Navy and The Royal Canadian Navy has grown over the years and there are some who have queried whether Canada is undergoing its own re-balance to the Pacific.²⁴ Unfortunately, during the last half decade Canada's Halifax-class frigates, the workhorses of the fleet, that have visited every corner of the Indian and Pacific Oceans, have been out of service undergoing major mid-life refits. Now they are setting out to sea again to take part in the huge Rim of the Pacific exercise off Hawaii and to deploy to Vietnam, Indonesia, Australia and New Zealand. Canada's navy has particularly close ties with the Royal Australian Navy and an RCN ship will be taking part in the RAN's Exercise Kakadu. At a time when the maritime environment in the Indo Pacific region is becoming increasingly brittle and the risk of miscalculation at sea continues to mount, naval diplomacy is vitally important.

While Canada takes no position on the claims to geographic features in the South China Sea, Canadian analysts have become increasingly dismayed by the way, in which the UN Convention Law of the Sea has been ignored, misinterpreted, and misapplied in the South China Sea. Canadian specialists contributed materially to the formulation of UNCLOS in the late 1970s and early 1980s and experts on maritime law are chagrined to see a historic international legal instrument being undermined so severely. Canada co-chaired a South China Sea Working Group for many years with Indonesia and that group addressed an array of issues like fisheries, hydrography, and pollution. Regrettably, when Ottawa terminated the funding after a decade, it was not picked up by any of the regional states and the initiative came to an

²⁴Tsuyoshi Kawasaki, "Where does Canada fit in the US-China strategic competition across the Pacific?" *International Journal*, April 2016, p. 15.

end. This is particularly unfortunate at a time when the Coral Triangle is under siege, when vital fish stocks are declining dangerously, and when marine pollution is on the rise.

CONCLUSION

Canada has not been as engaged in the Indo Pacific region as many Canadian specialists and critics of successive Canadian governments might have wished. The old saw “too little, too late” resonates, but as this series of reflections attempts to argue, there were, and are, profound geographic, economic, and demographic forces at work that have deflected Canadian attention away from the challenges and opportunities represented by Asia. Individual entrepreneurs, diplomats, and academics have worked hard over the years to highlight the importance of the region, but there was a failure of imagination on the part of national governments, whether Liberal or Conservative. The irresistible gravitational attraction of the American economy, the alliances in Europe and beyond that repeatedly reignited interest in and commitment to NATO and the Euro-Atlantic community, growing concerns about Canadian sovereignty in the Arctic, and the powerful dictates of Canadian electoral geography, meant that official Ottawa felt, consciously or unconsciously, that it could largely ignore developments in Asia. What is more, Conservative governments, headed by Stephen Harper, were acutely sensitive to public opinion polls and surveys by the Asia Pacific Foundation of Canada, revealed that the Canadian public was increasingly alarmed by the deterioration in human rights in parts of the region.²⁵ That being the case, the governments of the day amended their Asian policies accordingly, highlighting in the process the ongoing tension between Canadian values and interests. The new Liberal government promises greater engagement and transparency. To date (and it is very early in the life of this administration) the Asian dimensions of the government’s programme have been impressive. But the nation has a long way to go to re-establish its brand and reassure skeptics that Canada is genuinely interested in and

²⁵ Anonymous, “Canadian Domestic Constraints will frustrate Beijing,” *Oxford Analytica*, 18 May 2016.

committed to the region. Canada has a vast network of ties within the region, but the government needs to embrace the lessons of the past, that engagement in Asia involves consistent, persistent and comprehensive involvement over many years. Recent evidence suggest that it is doing just that.