

Elements of a Canadian Strategy for Southeast Asia: The Strategic Relevance of ASEAN

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At a moment of roiling geo-political turbulence and an unravelling world order, it is important to step back and take stock of Canadian options and priorities in Asia, including Southeast Asia, in a way bigger than business as usual.

The instincts and inclinations of the Trudeau government reflect a third generation of liberal internationalist thinking that includes a commitment to multilateral institutions, middle class prosperity, gender equality, and maintaining a rule-based order. But it has not yet articulated an integrated strategy for Asia or, for that matter, any other region of the world. China, Southeast Asia and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) were scarcely mentioned in the defence or development assistance reviews or Minister Freeland's speech in the House of Commons on June 6th, 2017.

For the moment, the overwhelming priority of the government is parsing and responding to Mr. Trump's Washington. There is little governmental appetite or public pressure for increased attention to Asia, much less a comprehensive strategy.

We need to think back to the late 1980s during the period Joe Clark was foreign minister for a time when Ottawa was deeply interested in Southeast Asia as a region and committed significant resources to new ASEAN-related initiatives. Successive governments have not neglected individual Southeast Asian countries. They have gradually established diplomatic representation with each of the 10 members of ASEAN, appointed an Ambassador to ASEAN, maintained a modest aid program in some of the countries in the region, launched occasional ministerial visits, and more or less faithfully attended meetings of regional organizations of which Canada is a member.

And it is not that Canada and Southeast Asia have fallen off each other's screens, only that the level of activity and creative cooperation fall far short of the immediate potential and strategic possibilities of what Richard Stubbs calls "a natural alliance."¹²¹ There has not been a significant and distinctive Canadian initiative in the region since the 1990s, when Ottawa sponsored workshops on managing potential conflicts in the South China Sea and on cooperative and human security. In addition, bilateral relations with several countries are constrained by a combination of consular and human rights cases.

As a prolegomena to the strategy that the country needs, I will outline here a reminder of why Southeast Asia matters to Canada now, the nature of the strategic moment,

¹²¹ Richard Stubbs, "ASEAN-Canada Relations: Anniversaries, Histories and the Future," ISEAS Yusof Ishak Institute (2017), <https://www.iseas.edu.sg/medias/video-gallery/item/5695-asean-lecture-aseancanada-relations-anniversaries-histories-and-the-future>. Accessed 11 August 2017.

our specific interests in ASEAN as a regional organization, and some ideas for putting more imagination and *umph* into our relations even in a context of diminished financial resources.

Why Southeast Asia and ASEAN matter

Several essays in this volume outline the economic importance of Southeast Asia for Canada in terms of markets for Canadian goods and services, educational exchanges, and integration into trans-Pacific value chains. We have a major and expanding economic interest in and with Southeast Asia countries.

Others also deal with Southeast Asia and ASEAN as important players in addressing a range of global issues important to Canada, among them climate change, infectious diseases, terrorism, pluralism, and a rules-based trading system.

As discussed in some of the other essays, but rarely in academic writing, the media or public discussion, what deserved further attention is the strategic importance of ASEAN in its Asian neighbourhood at a time of a major power shift, a rising China, and an unsettled and unpredictable United States.

ASEAN was forged in 1967 in a regional context of new and fragile states, violent inter-state rivalries, and pervasive major power intervention. The grouping's most remarkable success has been that 50 years later, it has not only survived and expanded but done so much to strengthen national capacities, curtail those inter-state conflicts, and provide a stable platform for regional economic cooperation and integration. The discursive power of the Association is seen in the fact that most observers treat ASEAN and Southeast Asia as synonymous.

Unlike the European Union, ASEAN is not a security community in which strong institutions and deep interconnections make war unthinkable. But it is a diplomatic community with habits of cooperation that make war among its members extremely unlikely and that produce a normative foundation for a wider Asia-Pacific region. It has provided a degree of order and civility in what is a diverse and complicated neighbourhood. More than a geographic space, it is at its best a place of imagination and action that provides a language of community and serves as an incubator for inclusive multilateralism.

In Eastern Asia and the Indo-Pacific worlds, ASEAN is the only multilateral game in town in a context where none of the major powers—China, the US, Russia, Japan or India—have the legitimacy or support to fashion an institutional architecture in their own image. More importantly, its norms, mechanisms and platforms are an imperfect but functional foundation for a stable regional order committed to open economic activity, pluralism, and non-violent means to conflict resolution. Engaging external powers has never been the core of ASEAN's mission. But in a context of deep interdependence and Eastern Asian-wide integration, securing Southeast Asia has meant being proactive in a wider region.

ASEAN is a central player in broader Asia Pacific issues, the fate of multilateralism and

what is now fashionable to call a rules-based regional order. One of its key features is that it is flexible, inclusive and non-aligned in fashioning those rules.

Rather than seeing ASEAN as counter-balancing or containing a rising China, its partners can support it as an organization committed to building a strong, stable, and prosperous Southeast Asia that remains open, pluralist, multi-cultural, and a hub for cooperative action within and beyond its immediate boundaries. Put another way, getting ASEAN right is a fundamental element of a Middle Power approach to getting China and US-China relations right. Canada and ASEAN have a common interest in an orderly and predictable world that places some limits to the ambition and reach of dominant powers, and that builds bridges across political and ideological divides.

The strategic context

There are two major forces shaping the strategic environment. One is the rise of China, a process in motion for two decades and accelerating in a regional context of its One Belt One Road and infrastructure push, as well as its deepening investments and construction projects in many parts of Southeast Asia. The weight and impact of China's economic rise are readily visible. It is the largest trading partner of ASEAN, a major investor, a key supporter of the ASEAN-led Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) negotiations, and orchestrating infrastructure investments and projects on a monumental scale. Its military capabilities are increasing in size and sophistication. Reclaimed reefs and artificial islands in the South China Sea may not be appreciated by other regional states, but they are tangible markers of China's evolving significance, self-confidence and assertiveness.

These tangible and visible dimensions of China's gravitational pull are reinforced by a more subtle but equally significant force: the rising presence and influence of China *inside* Southeast Asian countries. This new presence has multiple dimensions: the use of Chinese language; the popularity of Chinese culture; expanded flows of tourists, students, business people, and temporary workers; and new connections with overseas Chinese residents throughout the region.

The second is the Trump era and his "America First" commitment. The populism, xenophobia, and mean-spiritedness embodied in the Trump campaign and the first six months of his presidency, combined with images of a deeply divided and polarized America with a dysfunctional political system, have shaken Southeast Asia and the world. These are compounded by doubts about the Trump administration's commitment to an open trading system, globalization and global value chains, and the promotion of democratic values and human rights. The withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (which includes four Southeast Asian countries), the preference for new bilateral deals, diminished support for the United Nations and multilateral institutions are symptoms of a transactional, deal-centered, approach. It reflects and amplifies a zero-sum approach to international affairs far removed from the liberal international order that Trump's predecessors since Franklin Roosevelt endeavoured to build. The post-war American consensus on its preferred world order has

been fractured and American exceptionalism defined in a whole new way.

From a Southeast Asian perspective, Trump's America is increasingly unpredictable, difficult to trust, and of receding influence.

Canada, Germany, and the countries of Southeast Asia cannot expect the kind of American leadership that they have occasionally disagreed with but constantly depended upon for more than seventy years. As Minister Freeland prescribed, it is now essential "for the rest of us to set our own clear and sovereign course" including "an active role in the preservation and strengthening of the global order."¹²² Angela Merkel said something similar in observing that "the times on which we could completely depend on others are, to a certain extent, over...We Europeans truly have to take our fate into our own hands."¹²³

Southeast Asia faces the same challenge. There is no reason to think its task will be any easier, or less important, in a broader world that includes contesting giants on ASEAN's doorstep. But there is every reason to give it support and encouragement.

Next steps

Even in advance of the formulation of a well-developed and articulated strategy, there are several steps Canada can take.

First, seek membership in key regional institutions including the East Asia Summit and the ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting Plus (ADMM-Plus) not as ends in themselves but as means to achieving political and economic objectives that are clearly defined and effectively communicated.

Second, expand our understanding and support for the work of the ASEAN Secretariat. It requires new resources to do what it already does well. We cannot solve the problem of chronic underfunding from its member countries (its annual budget of \$26 million is roughly 1/8000th that of the EU). The "ASEAN Online" management software provided to the secretariat has been helpful but not widely communicated in Canada or within the region. We need something more visible as a way to catch public attention. The recently announced *Scholarships and Educational Exchanges for Development* initiative is a good step in that direction.¹²⁴

Third, at a time that the international order appears, in Joe Clark's words, to be "coming

¹²² Global Affairs Canada. "Address by Minister Freeland on Canada's Foreign Policy." 6 June 2017, https://www.canada.ca/en/global-affairs/news/2017/06/address_by_ministerfreelandoncanadasforeignpolicypriorities.html Accessed 11 August 2017.

¹²³ Susan Moore, "Angela Merkel shows how the leader of the free world should act," *The Guardian* (29 May 2017), <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/may/29/angela-merkel-leader-free-world-donald-trump>. Accessed 11 August 2017.

¹²⁴ Global Affairs Canada, "Canada announces new scholarship program for ASEAN," (6 August 2017) https://www.canada.ca/en/global-affairs/news/2017/08/canada_announcesnewscholarshipprogramforasean.html. Accessed 11 August 2017.

apart,” take advantage of Middle Power credentials and possibilities. The most creative period in Canada-ASEAN relations was fuelled by the vision and chemistry of political leaders on both sides. It happened in the context of uncertainty created by the ending of the Cold War and a geo-strategic tilt toward US dominance, at the same time Canada and most ASEAN members were pursuing expanded engagement with China. The fortuitous result was a doubling down on bilateral links and multilateral institution-building through imaginative support for organizations like the ASEAN Regional Forum. Ottawa also provided substantial support for track-two processes focused on the South China Sea and regional security cooperation as well as ASEAN-anchored institutions, including the Council for Security Cooperation in Asia Pacific. It is regrettable, and not unnoticed in the region, that Canadian funding for these dialogue channels has largely dried up. These need to be renewed with a new kind of coordinating and communication mechanism and the involvement of a next generation of participants and leaders.

Fourth, beyond showing up, Ottawa should show leadership and commitment by championing and sponsoring one or two well-chosen and high-profile initiatives. Some at the conference outlined possibilities in the educational sector. Another possibility that addresses a vital regional issue of economic, social, diplomatic, and military significance concerns the management of marine resources in the South China Sea, especially the collapse of fish stocks. It is only a slight exaggeration to say that it will not be long before there are more submarines than fish in regional waters. The governance challenges in protecting marine resources are huge and need careful mapping and new mechanisms for cooperation despite conflicting territorial and sovereignty claims. Canadian experience with the collapse of its own East Coast fishery plus the earlier role in track-two processes on related matters in the South China Sea are both recognized and important. This particular issue could serve as an important, concrete basis for a constructive, original, and cross-sectoral reengagement of the region.

In short, moving beyond a low-key but respectful partnership with ASEAN and key Southeast Asian countries to something more dynamic is especially important at this uncertain moment. To get ASEAN attention and support it will need to be anchored in a well-articulated and communicated strategy and include an identifiable set of distinctive initiatives. This conference is a sign that Ottawa is considering options on what both of these should look like. Minister Freeland’s first visit to the region in August 2017 for the ARF ministerial meetings, and the resulting announcements¹²⁵, is an encouraging development.

¹²⁵ Global Affairs Canada, “New Canadian assistance in Southeast Asia.” 7 August 2017, https://www.canada.ca/en/global-affairs/news/2017/08/new_canadian_assistanceinsoutheastasia.html. Accessed 22 August 2017.