

# Introduction

## Southeast Asia in an Evolving Global Landscape: What Role for Canada?

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After years of fleeting attention towards the Asia-Pacific, the time finally seems ripe for a tangible re-engagement of Canada in this part of the world, allowing the country to position itself more credibly as a “Pacific nation”.<sup>1</sup> Southeast Asia in particular, a primary hub of Asian regionalism, has imposed itself as the unavoidable focus of Canada’s hints at a potential revitalization of its ties with the wider region. As the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Canada’s dialogue partnership with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) is celebrated this year, and coincides with the golden jubilee of ASEAN itself, the context is indeed favourable for this relationship to be brought to the next level.

There are indications of the Trudeau government’s desire to devise a comprehensive strategy towards ASEAN and Southeast Asia, beyond another re-enactment of aspirational intentions without substance and following through. The ASEAN-Canada Plan of Action for an Enhanced Partnership (2016-2020) is one of them.<sup>2</sup> The conference *Southeast Asia in an Evolving Global Landscape: Prospects for an Integrated Region and Implications for Canada*, hosted on May 30, 2017 by Global Affairs Canada, is another. Accordingly, contributors to this conference volume all provide concrete, innovative, yet realistic recommendations for developing a sound and effective Canadian foreign policy towards Southeast Asia and the wider Asia-Pacific region. This will help Canada find its niche, and make a distinctive, noticeable mark in a region where an array of players already vie for attention.

The Canadian government has recognized the importance of developing relations with Southeast Asia in a more systematic way in recent years, particularly in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis. This dynamic region obviously has a lot going for it, and is increasingly difficult to ignore. With a combined GDP of more than US\$2.5 trillion, a population of over 625 million, and the presence of fast growing economies in Indonesia, Vietnam, and the Philippines, Southeast Asia has much to offer in terms of trade and investment opportunities

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<sup>1</sup> Justin Trudeau, “Statement by the Prime Minister of Canada celebrating 40 years of partnership with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations.” 2017, <http://pm.gc.ca/eng/news/2017/02/03/statement-prime-minister-canada-celebrating-40-years-partnership-association>. Accessed 11 August 2017.

<sup>2</sup> ASEAN, “Plan of Action to Implement the Joint Declaration on ASEAN-Canada Enhanced Partnership (2016-2020).” 2016, [http://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/images/2015/August/POA\\_canada/ASEAN-Canada%20PoA%20adopted.pdf](http://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/images/2015/August/POA_canada/ASEAN-Canada%20PoA%20adopted.pdf). Accessed 22 August 2017.

alone,<sup>3</sup> as Mairead Lavery's paper shows in more detail. It also faces many challenges that, according to Brian Harding and Sidney Jones, also bear on Canada's security, such as terrorism, climate change, or pandemics. Therefore, Southeast Asia is fast becoming an obvious focus of Canadian attention. However, it remains less evident for regional states what "cold, far away and [as of now] uninvolved"<sup>4</sup> Canada can actually bring to an already crowded table in its attempt to prove that it belongs to an increasingly selective Asia-Pacific club of nations.

As a way to demonstrate its value, especially to its Southeast Asian partners, Canada has made an important and much-needed correction to previous neglect by appointing a dedicated ambassador to the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in 2009. It also acceded to ASEAN's Treaty of Amity and Cooperation in 2010, a precondition for joining the East Asia Summit, and has been working actively towards the establishment of diplomatic representation in all ten member states. This was completed with the opening of a Canadian Embassy in Myanmar (2014), as well as offices in Cambodia (2015) and Laos (2016). At recent ARF and ASEAN Post-Ministerial Meetings in Manila in August 2017, a series of announcements have been made that highlight Canada's commitment in supporting counterterrorism, combatting human trafficking, responding to infectious diseases, and providing humanitarian assistance throughout the region.<sup>5</sup> But Canada is still lagging behind in comparison to other, like-minded dialogue partners of ASEAN that have more successfully claimed their affiliation to a region that is at the same time increasingly falling back to a more circumspect, East Asian definition of its geographical boundaries.

Canada's previous contributions to regional peace, stability and prosperity are widely remembered in a positive light, particularly its direct support to the South China Sea Dialogues in the 1990s. As Lindsey Ford, Elina Noor, and Brian Harding's papers emphasize, Canada still has a lot to offer in terms of helping out in the peaceful management of these disputes, albeit through softer means than other powers. Bringing value-added through innovative initiatives that distinguish Canada's contribution from that of other players is crucially important, despite having unfortunately been forgotten over the years. But as Rt Hon. Joe Clark remarked during the conference in Ottawa, nostalgia of Canada's former standing and reputation in the region will not be a sufficient driver for designing current policy. Nowadays, Canada's commitment will necessarily be evaluated against a relatively poor track record of engagement since the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, which has certainly not gone unnoticed. It needs to be ramped up accordingly, and infused with more imagination, if the government's wish to join new diplomatic fora, such as the highly coveted East Asia

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<sup>3</sup> Joshua Brown and Wayne Farmer, "Canada must look beyond China toward a broader Asian trade deal." *The Globe and Mail* (19 April 2017), <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/report-on-business/rob-commentary/canada-must-look-beyond-china-toward-a-broader-asian-trade-deal/article34752224/>. Accessed 11 August 2017.

<sup>4</sup> James Boutilier, "Reflections on Canada's Engagement with Asia", paper presented at the 30<sup>th</sup> Asia-Pacific Roundtable, Kuala Lumpur (31 May 2016).

<sup>5</sup> 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](https://www.canada.ca/en/global-affairs/news/2017/08/new_canadian_assistanceinsoutheastasia.html). Accessed 22 August 2017.

Summit, is to be made reality.<sup>6</sup> The extension of an invitation to Primer Minister Trudeau to attend the next EAS as Guest of the Chair is a good opportunity for Canada to try and reverse the ongoing doubts about the value of making room for it more systematically. The fact that the recent ASEAN Post-Ministerial Meeting with Canada, held in Manila, “took note,” in typical ASEAN-speak, of its desire to join the EAS and the ADMM-Plus should in no way be interpreted as more than polite scepticism.<sup>7</sup>

Securing a foothold in Southeast Asia, especially in the case of high-level ASEAN-led meetings, will not happen overnight, and while more active engagement would indeed be welcome, Canada has to be realistic. It first needs to put in the work in order to prove to its East Asian partners that this interest is not sporadic, and can withstand electoral cycles and adjustments in foreign policy priorities. Also, this must first be done through proactive, constructive and sustained leadership within mechanisms, both official and less formal, where it is already represented. Contributions by Elina Noor, Jonathan Miller, Brian Harding, and Paul Evans all provide indications in this regard, as a way to send out more persuasive signals that Canada, indeed, “is back”<sup>8</sup> in the Asia-Pacific. Canada’s co-hosting of ARF inter-sessional meetings and workshops, such as the recently announced workshop on Peacekeeping<sup>9</sup>, is appreciated, and must continue. To make sure that previously missed opportunities<sup>10</sup> were just temporary setbacks, Canada will also crucially have to actively seek the advice of its Southeast Asian partners, and direct appropriate resources to the replenishment of Canadian expertise on the region, therefore tapping on its proven ability<sup>11</sup> to increase the country’s visibility and standing across the Pacific. The reasons behind ASEAN’s reticence to expand the current membership of the EAS and ADMM-Plus are understandable, and need to be taken into account. If Canada wishes to make a convincing case, it has to alleviate fears that including it would further undermine the already brittle ability of ASEAN to retain the initiative in these fora. Currently, ASEAN benefits from little more than power in numbers to exert its so-called “centrality,” i.e. having more member states than external partners at the table. It won’t be open to expand membership unless there is hard proof that it would gain from it enough to counterbalance the risk of seeing its influence further diluted.

<sup>6</sup> ASEAN, “Canada seeks to join EAS,” 24 March 2011, <http://asean.org/canada-seeks-to-join-eas/>. Accessed 11 August 2017.

<sup>7</sup> ASEAN, “Chairman Statement of the ASEAN Post-Ministerial Conference (PMC) 10+1 sessions with dialogue partners.” Manila (6 August 2017), <http://asean.org/storage/2017/08/ASEAN-PMC-Chairmans-Statement-FINAL1.pdf>. Accessed 18 August 2017.

<sup>8</sup> The Canadian Press, “‘We’re back,’ Justin Trudeau says in message to Canada’s allies abroad.” *The National Post* (20 October 2015), <http://nationalpost.com/news/politics/were-back-justin-trudeau-says-in-message-to-canadas-allies-abroad/wcm/919c5f99-29ba-4082-a060-c341d0d2ff21> Accessed. 11 August 2017.

<sup>9</sup> 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](https://www.canada.ca/en/global-affairs/news/2017/08/new_canadian_assistanceinsoutheastasia.html). Accessed 22 August 2017.

<sup>10</sup> Amitav Acharya, “Canada and Asia-Pacific: Time to Make Up for Lost Time,” Asia Pacific Foundation of Canada (18 May 2011), <https://www.asiapacific.ca/op-eds/canada-and-asia-pacific-time-make-lost-time> Accessed 11 August 2017.

<sup>11</sup> Paul Evans, “Canada and Asia Pacific’s Track-Two Diplomacy,” *International Journal* 64(4): 1027-1038.

In more general terms, Canada's policy towards Southeast Asia needs to be both pragmatic and comprehensive, therefore going beyond, as Jonathan Miller also notes, the trade-focused approach that continues to be favoured, but is perceived as overly opportunistic, self-interested, and therefore short-sighted in the region. To find secure footing in the region, Canada needs to actively seek –to borrow a famous Indonesian foreign policy concept for the region– its own “dynamic equilibrium” in Southeast Asia. This means finding a delicate, flexible balance between economic and security cooperation, and between regular participation in wider diplomatic fora and targeted contributions to functional initiatives. It also means balancing between the cultivation of stable, lasting relations with individual countries with diverse political regimes and levels of development, as well as diverging priorities –as emphasized by Kai Ostwald in his chapter, and in Nhu Truong's conclusion to this volume–, and consistent support to the ASEAN-centric regional architecture. The importance of this latter combination, and the need to differentiate between ASEAN as an institution that is more than the sum of its parts, and the Southeast Asian region and its individual countries, cannot be over-emphasized. A comprehensive approach to the region has to be two-pronged in this way. It also, of course, means giving Southeast Asia the space –and budgetary and staff resources– it deserves within a broader foreign policy that has to juggle with different priorities and cover other geographical areas, including other Asian “subregions,” with limited room for manoeuvre.

This is no small feat, but the papers comprised here share the important advantage of taking these constraints directly into account when formulating recommendations that are creative, selective, and build on Canada's expertise and specificity. These areas include disaster relief, gender equality, the sustainable management of fish stocks, human rights, and naval diplomacy, among others. Sometimes, as pointed out by Sidney Jones with regards to counter-terrorism, or Deborah Elms and Barath Haritas on negotiating an FTA with ASEAN, playing it smart may also mean to avoid blindly following paths initiated by others, which intuitively seem as obvious win-wins but may not be that cost-effective. Elina Noor and Jonathan Miller also highlight opportunities for Canada to take up the torch in stalled initiatives, especially the revival of the Trans-Pacific Partnership with its remaining 11 members.

In the midst of fluctuating, revisionist behaviour on the part of great powers, there is increasing demand for middle powers to effectively “step up”<sup>12</sup> on the international arena, assume a “helpful-fixer”<sup>13</sup> role, and exert a more benevolent, stabilizing form of global leadership. One that goes beyond posturing and self-image projection. One that both upholds the current rules-based order and its multilateral institutions, yet is also aware, and respectful, of the desire of non-Western players to be more fairly represented. As Christopher Goscha and Kai Ostwald make clear in their essays, Canada, more so than

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<sup>12</sup> Global Affairs Canada, “Address by Minister Freeland on Canada's foreign policy priorities,” 6 June 2017, [https://www.canada.ca/en/global-affairs/news/2017/06/address\\_by\\_ministerfreelandoncanadasforeignpolicypriorities.html](https://www.canada.ca/en/global-affairs/news/2017/06/address_by_ministerfreelandoncanadasforeignpolicypriorities.html). Accessed 11 August 2011.

<sup>13</sup> David Welch, “Asia-Pacific Security: Will Canada Re-Engage?” in *ISIS-Malaysia Focus* 2 (2016): 16-17.

its French and German counterparts –which for obvious reasons will continue to direct more of their energy towards the Atlantic front– is well-positioned to seize the opportunity to undertake this role in the Asia-Pacific, particularly through enhanced relations with its Southeast Asian core. The primary focus of this volume’s contributions is to light the path for Canada to succeed in this endeavour, therefore also identifying what its partners could gain from it. The formal acknowledgment of the conference that led to this volume in the Chairman Statement of the last ASEAN Post-Ministerial Conference in Manila shows that ASEAN and Southeast Asia are indeed open to listen to what Canada has to say for itself.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> ASEAN, “Chairman Statement of the ASEAN Post-Ministerial Conference (PMC) 10+1 sessions with dialogue partners,” Manila (6 August 2017), <http://asean.org/storage/2017/08/ASEAN-PMC-Chairmans-Statement-FINAL1.pdf>. Accessed 18 August 2017.