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Books in Revue/ Critiques de livres Paul Evans, David Dewitt and Brian Job: Building Cooperative Security in Asia Pacific: Canadian Track-Two Initiatives, 1989-2005 University of British Columbia, 2024, pp. 15-17

Stewart Henderson

Evans, Dewitt, and Job’s comprehensive examination of Canadian Track-Two initiatives in the Asia Pacific region represents a landmark contribution to our understanding of middle power diplomacy and Canada's distinctive role in fostering regional security dialogue during a pivotal period of post-Cold War transformation.

Drawing on their extensive firsthand experience and deep scholarly expertise, the authors provide an insightful analysis of how Canadian academics, think tanks, and civil society organizations helped shape the regional security architecture between 1989 and 2005. Their work represents not just a historical documentation but a masterful analysis of the mechanisms and principles that made Canadian Track-Two diplomacy particularly effective during this period of regional transformation. The paper’s greatest strength lies in its detailed documentation of how Canadian Track-Two initiatives served as vital laboratories for testing new security concepts and building informal networks of trust among regional stakeholders.

The authors convincingly demonstrate how Canada’s perceived status as an “honest broker” – lacking major territorial disputes or military presence in the region – enabled Canadian institutions to play a constructive role in facilitating dialogue on sensitive security issues. This positioning, combined with Canada's commitment to multilateralism and its established relationships with regional actors, created unique opportunities for Canadian-led initiatives to bridge divides and foster innovative approaches to regional security challenges. The authors skilfully illustrate how this special status allowed Canadian facilitators to push boundaries and explore new ideas in ways that might have been impossible for representatives of larger powers. The methodological approach deserves special praise. The combination of historical analysis, case studies, and personal insights provides a rich, multi-layered understanding of how Track-Two diplomacy actually works in practice.

The paper benefits enormously from the authors' direct involvement in many of the initiatives they describe, allowing them to offer insider perspectives while maintaining scholarly objectivity. Their careful attention to both the formal structures of Track-Two processes and the informal dynamics that often determined their success offers valuable insights for practitioners and scholars alike. The authors excel in their nuanced analysis of the institutional dynamics that characterized successful TrackTwo initiatives. Their detailed examination of how Canadian organizations navigated the complex web of regional relationships, institutional rivalries, and competing national interests provides valuable insights into the practical challenges of informal diplomacy. The paper’s discussion of how Canadian facilitators maintained credibility while pushing for progressive change in regional security thinking is particularly illuminating, offering important lessons for contemporary practitioners.

The authors’ analysis of the role of key institutions - including universities, think tanks, and government-funded research organizations – helps explain how Canada was able to sustain long-term engagement despite changes in its own political leadership and funding priorities. Particularly noteworthy is the authors’ analysis of how Canadian-led Track-Two processes helped incubate and develop key institutional innovations in Asian regional security cooperation. Their discussion of the role of the North Pacific Cooperative Security Dialogue (NPCSD) and similar initiatives in laying the groundwork for what would become the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) offers important historical insights into the evolution of Asia Pacific's security architecture.

The authors skillfully demonstrate how Canadian initiatives helped translate abstract concepts of cooperative security into practical institutional arrangements, often serving as crucial testing grounds for ideas that would later be adopted in formal diplomatic settings. Their detailed examination of specific cases shows how Canadian-led dialogues helped regional actors develop shared understanding and common approaches to security challenges, even when formal agreements remained elusive. The paper excels in highlighting the unique characteristics of Canadian TrackTwo diplomacy during this period: its emphasis on inclusive dialogue, its focus on building intellectual and institutional capacity in regional partners, and its commitment to longterm relationship building rather than short-term policy wins. The authors make a persuasive case for how this approach helped establish enduring networks of expertise and trust that continued to influence regional security discussions long after specific initiatives concluded.

The analysis of how Canadian facilitators balanced competing demands - maintaining academic rigour while ensuring policy relevance, fostering frank dialogue while respecting political sensitivities – provides valuable insights into the art of Track-Two diplomacy. One of the pape’s most valuable contributions is its detailed examination of how Canadian initiatives helped develop and disseminate new security concepts in the region. The authors’ trace how ideas about cooperative security, human security, and multilateral engagement were introduced, debated, and refined through TrackTwo processes, eventually influencing official policy discussions and institutional development.

This intellectual history helps explain both the evolution of regional security thinking and Canada’s role in shaping it. The authors’ analysis of how specific concepts moved from Track-Two discussions into official policy demonstrates the important role of informal diplomacy in conceptual innovation and policy development. The paper’s treatment of the relationship between TrackTwo initiatives and official diplomacy is particularly sophisticated. (Note: this reviewer, working in the Policy Planning Staff and later in the Asia Pacific Branch, was responsible for the initial structure of the North Pacific Cooperative Security Dialogue.) The authors explore how informal dialogues complemented formal diplomatic processes, at times preparing the ground for official initiatives and other times providing alternative channels when formal diplomacy was constrained.

Their analysis of how Canadian Track-Two initiatives maintained productive relationships with both government officials and civil society actors offers important insights into the delicate balancing act required for effective “informal diplomacy”. They acknowledge where initiatives fell short of their ambitious goals while demonstrating how even apparent failures often yielded unexpected positive outcomes in terms of relationship building and concept development. This honest appraisal strengthens their overall analysis and provides valuable lessons for contemporary practitioners about the importance of realistic expectations and long-term perspective in Track-Two diplomacy. Their discussion of the challenges faced by Canadian initiatives – including funding constraints, competing institutional priorities, and shifting domestic political environments – offers important insights into the practical difficulties of sustaining Track-Two engagement.

The historical analysis remains deeply relevant to contemporary discussions about middle power diplomacy and the role of TrackTwo processes in regional security building. At a time when formal diplomatic channels are constrained by great power tensions, the authors’ insights into the value of informal dialogue and network building take on renewed significance. Their examination of how Canadian initiatives helped manage great power dynamics while empowering smaller regional states offers valuable lessons for current efforts to maintain cooperative security dialogue in an increasingly polarized environment.

The authors’ analysis of how Track-Two processes can help build resilience in regional security relationships is particularly relevant to current challenges. The paper also makes an important contribution to our understanding of the role of individual leadership and institutional capacity in Track-Two diplomacy. Through their detailed account of key initiatives and personalities, the authors demonstrate how the success of informal diplomacy often depends on the skills, relationships, and credibility of individual facilitators and their institutional backing. This human dimension of Track-Two diplomacy is often overlooked in more theoretical treatments but is crucial for understanding both its potential and limitations. The authors’ attention to the importance of personal relationships and trust-building in Track-Two processes offers valuable insights for practitioner training and institutional development.

A particularly valuable aspect of the paper is its analysis of how Canadian Track-Two initiatives adapted to changing regional circumstances over the sixteen-year period under study. The authors show how Canadian facilitators adjusted their approaches in response to evolving security challenges and shifts in the international environment. This adaptive capacity, they argue, was crucial to the long-term effectiveness of Canadian Track-Two diplomacy and offers important lessons for contemporary practitioners.

The paper’s examination of the institutional infrastructure supporting Canadian Track-Two initiatives is especially illuminating. The authors detail how various Canadian institutions – universities, think tanks, government agencies, and civil society organizations – worked to maintain sustained engagement with regional partners. Their analysis of how this institutional network developed and evolved offers valuable insights for countries seeking to build their own Track-Two diplomatic capabilities.

Their work not only documents but also provides a sophisticated framework for understanding the continuing importance of Track-Two diplomacy in regional security building. The paper stands as a testament to Canada's unique contributions to regional security dialogue and offers important lessons for future efforts to promote cooperative security in the Asia Pacific region.

Stewart Henderson served in Asia, Europe, the Middle East and headquarters focused on political-security issues, including the development of the North Pacific Cooperative Security Dialogue (NPCSD).