



Rethinking Canada's security interests in Southeast Asia: from "Asia-Pacific" to "Indo-Pacific"

Jennifer Mustapha

To cite this article: Jennifer Mustapha (2023): Rethinking Canada's security interests in Southeast Asia: from "Asia-Pacific" to "Indo-Pacific", Canadian Foreign Policy Journal, DOI: [10.1080/11926422.2023.2203936](https://doi.org/10.1080/11926422.2023.2203936)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/11926422.2023.2203936>



Published online: 16 May 2023.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 91



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)



Rethinking Canada's security interests in Southeast Asia: from "Asia-Pacific" to "Indo-Pacific"

Jennifer Mustapha

Political Science, Huron University College, London, Canada

ABSTRACT

Canada must decide what type of multilateral actor it wants to be in its security relations in Southeast Asia, especially in light of the recent release of Ottawa's official "Indo-Pacific Strategy" (IPS) in late 2022. There is growing disconnect between Canada's national self-perception as an established middle-power and successful promoter of development and democracy in the region, and how Canada is increasingly regarded in Southeast Asia: as a mostly peripheral *aide-de-camp* of Anglo-American global hegemony. In this context, a strong case can be made for Canada's need to chart a path in Southeast Asian security relations that is distinct from American interests, and that promotes meaningful engagement with ASEAN and its member states along a variety of registers, scales, and tracks. Importantly, Canada's reputational decline in Southeast Asia is emblematic of a larger problem, which is its diminishing regional role and stature as a credible and honest broker of multilateralism in support of a rules based international order. It remains to be seen whether or not Canada's IPS can adequately rise to these ongoing challenges.

Le Canada doit décider du type d'acteur multilatéral qu'il souhaite être dans ses relations de sécurité en Asie du Sud-Est, en particulier à la lumière de la récente publication « stratégie indopacifique » (SIP) officielle d'Ottawa à la fin de l'année 2022. Il existe un décalage croissant entre l'auto-perception nationale du Canada en tant que puissance moyenne et efficace établie qui favorise le développement et la démocratie dans la région, et la manière dont le Canada est, de façon croissante, perçu en Asie du Sud-Est : à savoir comme un aide de camp essentiellement périphérique de l'hégémonie mondiale anglo-américaine. Dans ce contexte, on peut affirmer avec force que le Canada doit tracer une voie dans les relations de sécurité en Asie du Sud-Est qui soit distincte des intérêts américains et qui favorise un engagement significatif avec l'ANASE et ses États membres selon une variété de registres, d'échelles et de voies. Il est important de relever que le déclin de la réputation du Canada en Asie du Sud-Est est emblématique d'un problème plus large, à savoir la diminution de son rôle régional et de sa stature en tant qu'intermédiaire crédible et honnête du multilatéralisme en faveur d'un ordre international fondé sur des règles. Il reste à savoir si la SIP du Canada peut ou non relever ces défis continus de manière adéquate.

KEYWORDS

Canada; Canadian foreign policy; Southeast Asia; ASEAN; security; regional security; Asia-Pacific; indo-Pacific; indo-Pacific strategy

Introduction: where is Canada?

Canada is not known for its enduring presence or profile in Southeast Asia. Canadian representation in regional governance has been inconsistent in both frequency and tenor since Canada became an official ASEAN dialogue partner in 1977. The lack of continuity or consistency in Canada-ASEAN relations can be attributed to a number of factors, chief among them the markedly different approaches to multilateralism espoused by successive Canadian governments over the last 45 years. Within the shifting historical, geopolitical and socio-economic contexts of this period, Canada's relations with ASEAN and its members have ranged from generic friendliness to mutual benign neglect. The dynamics that make up the various iterations of Canada-Southeast Asian relations are explored in this special issue, and my own contribution considers some of Canada's key security interests in contemporary Southeast Asia.

In this article, I ask three questions. First, *what are some of Canada's key security interests in Southeast Asia?* Second, *what analytical traps should Canadian policy makers avoid when considering security interests in Southeast Asia?* And third, *what should Canadian policy makers be doing in Southeast Asia to advance Canadian security interests?* This article addresses these questions by identifying regional security issues that are significant to Canadian interests, and cautions against several common analytical traps that the Canadian foreign policy establishment tends towards in their approaches to Southeast Asia and the broader Asia-Pacific. I explain why these inclinations require rethinking, and how they may further contribute to outcomes that are inimical to Canadian interests. In light of the recent release of Canada's much-anticipated official Indo-Pacific Strategy (2022), I then suggest some policy approaches to support regional stability and strengthen broader regional commitments to a rules based international order (RBIO) rooted in principles of international law.

This article issues an earnest challenge for policy makers: that Canada needs to decide what type of multilateral actor it wants to be in its security relations in Southeast Asia. There is growing disconnect between Canada's self-perception as an established middle-power and successful promoter of economic development and democracy, and how Canada is increasingly regarded in Southeast Asia: as a mostly peripheral *aide-de-camp* of Anglo-American global hegemony. Canadian policymakers need to rethink their approach to the region and take this reputational challenge seriously, by charting a path in Southeast Asian relations that is distinct from American security interests, and that promotes meaningful engagement with ASEAN and its member countries along a variety of registers, scales, and tracks. It remains to be seen whether or not Canada's IPS can adequately rise to these ongoing challenges.

Contextualizing Canada's security interests in Southeast Asia

Canada's own forays into the Asia-Pacific region have focused mainly on trade and economic relations rather than defence and security relations (Dewitt et al., 2018; Holland, 2021). To the extent that Canadian defence and security operations have been active in Asia, they have tended to do so under the aegis of multilateral military exercises in partnership with allies like the United States, who are more front-facing in the region (Dewitt et al., 2018; Reeves, 2020). In Southeast Asia in particular, since Canada's official

engagement as a dialogue partner with ASEAN began in 1977, it was Foreign (now Global) Affairs Canada (GAC) rather than Defence (DND) that provided the lead on ASEAN engagement. Between 1990 and 2015 DND officials participated inconsistently at ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) activities, and none were present at the ASEAN-Canada Joint Cooperation Committee between 1985 and 1997. Hence, at the Track 1 level more generally “the record of Canada’s [security and defence] relationship with ASEAN reveals fairly passive, tag-along traits” (Dewitt et al., 2018, p. 24).

As security observers have pointed out, despite Canada’s oft-declared commitment to peace and security in the Asia-Pacific, Canada’s “quest to be acknowledged by most Asian countries as a serious and committed full participant in the ... security of Southeast and Northeast Asia” (Dewitt et al., 2018, p. 24) remains unfulfilled into the present. This relative “absence” of Canada in regional security relations is compounded by a persistent dearth of departmental coordination between DND and GAC; inconsistent participation in Track 1.5 and Track 2 opportunities to engage in security-related regional cooperation; and a notable lack of comprehensively framed policy strategies for the region (Evans, 2017; Reeves, 2020).

Related to this last point, the discursive shift away from “Asia-Pacific” to “Indo-Pacific” denotes an observable (re)conceptualization of the broader region that has been creeping into both policy and academic discourse (Holland, 2021; Khurana, 2018; Miller, 2020). In February 2022, the White House released its official “Indo-Pacific Strategy of the United States,” outlining commitments towards a particular vision for a “Free and Open Indo-Pacific” (FOIP) under Biden’s administration. Notable in Biden’s 2022 Indo-Pacific strategy, is the frequent appeal to shared interests with like-minded nations in Washington’s vision for a FOIP. It specifically mentions the United Kingdom, France, Australia, India, and Japan in this regard, whereas Canada is not mentioned once in the entire document. This latter point was not missed by Canadian security observers who lamented Canada’s exclusion from allies’ more recent efforts to “counter China” via instruments like The Quadrilateral Dialogue (The Quad) and the Australian-United Kingdom-United States trilateral security pact (AUKUS) (Mitchell, 2021; Raaymakers, 2021). However, as discussed below, this exclusion is not necessarily inimical to Canada’s own regional security interests (Carvin, 2021; Fortier et al., 2022).

Washington’s FOIP strategy is also notable for its framing of the region as the “Indo-Pacific,” marking a substantive departure in categorization from the “Asia-Pacific” and one increasingly adopted by the Canadian policy establishment in recent years (Holland, 2021; Miller, 2020). Although regional scholars and policy critics (Lovely, 2022) have expressed wariness towards this discursive manoeuvre, the re-framing of the regional concept to “the Indo-Pacific” is an important context within which to consider contemporary Canada-Southeast Asian security relations. Accordingly, both DND and GAC now almost exclusively default to using “Indo-Pacific” as the *de facto* descriptor of the wider region. This was evident with Foreign Affairs Minister Mélanie Joly’s official regional visit in early 2022, which according to GAC was meant to “reinforce bilateral relations and expand partnerships in the *Indo-Pacific*.” Subsequently, “Canada’s Indo-Pacific Strategy” was released in November 2022 as Ottawa’s official regional policy document, further entrenching this nomenclature. As discussed below, this shift in taxonomy is significant and perhaps misguided.

ASEAN, for its part, seems to have acquiesced to the Anglo-American fashion of referring to the “Indo-Pacific,” but only up to a point (Darmawan, 2021). In the organization’s 2019 summit statement, ASEAN acknowledges the framing of the “Indo-Pacific,” but only in the context of ASEAN’s own important position as a crucial connection between the Asia-Pacific and Indian-Ocean (Darmawan, 2021). ASEAN sees itself as a central player in this widely conceived region, positioned to operate as both fulcrum point and gateway. According to this logic, there can be no “Indo-Pacific” without ASEAN, by definition. This is an important alternate framing of the Indo-Pacific concept, challenging the notion that it only operates as a counter to China’s sphere of influence in Asia. Importantly, no matter which way you slice the “Indo-Pacific,” ASEAN remains geographically and conceptually at its centre, and Canada ignores this key role of Southeast Asia at its own peril.

Pre-dating Ottawa’s 2022 IPS, some of Canada’s regional security interests were articulated in the “ASEAN-Canada Plan of Action for an Enhanced Partnership,” drafted with ASEAN in 2016, partly to signal the Trudeau Liberals’ renewed interest in the region after years of relative neglect under Harper’s Conservatives (Evans, 2017). It outlined several areas of political and security cooperation spanning the period from 2021–2025 and re-iterated Canada’s main security concerns in the region, which include *maritime tensions in the South China Sea (SCS)*; *growing Great Power rivalry between the United States and China*; and *the governance of human security challenges that threaten a rules-based regional order*. The latter “human security challenges” include political instability and state oppression of minority groups; transnational terrorism and crime; disaster and pandemic response; and issues in Women Peace and Security (WPS). Contextualizing all of this is the complex, multi-scalar and polysemic regional governance environment in Southeast Asia (Martel, 2020) that includes a “noodle-bowl” of multilateral organizations and instruments, bilateral relationships, epistemic and diplomatic communities of practice, and international legal structures (Feng, 2018; Mustapha, 2019).

Key security interest 1: maintaining geo-political stability in Southeast Asia

Canada’s chief security interest in Southeast Asia, simply put, is the continued maintenance of regional geo-political stability. “Stability” in this regard mostly refers to the maintenance of relatively amicable relations among and between ASEAN members, and between ASEAN members and China. In this respect, ongoing maritime disputes in the SCS pose the main challenge to strategic relations in the region. These tensions with China involve several regional actors, including Brunei, Malaysia, the Philippines, Taiwan, Indonesia, and Vietnam. China’s escalating SCS maritime claims coincide with changes in foreign policy that have occurred under Xi Jinping (Chubb, 2020; Zhu, 2020). The “assertiveness” of Xi’s so-called “Wolf Warrior Diplomacy” has certainly heightened tensions among the regional players in these maritime disputes (Medina, 2017; Yar 2019; Zhu, 2020). “Assertiveness” here refers to “when China . . . actively pursues its interests and acts boldly toward achieving its goals, even if they contradict the interests of other actors” (Turcsanyi, 2017). In the case of the SCS, situations that fulfil this criteria began in earnest around 2010 and include under-sea cable-cutting, the Scarborough and Thomas Shoals stand-offs, construction of artificial islands, nuclear power plant construction, and the deployment of missile systems on the Spratly and Paracel Islands (Carugati, 2021; Medina, 2017; Yar, 2019).

China's territorial claims cover between 80–90% of the SCS, and are based on Beijing's contentious assertions around the so-called "Nine-Dash Line." Importantly, the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) consistently finds Chinese actions and territorial claims in the SCS to be in violation of international law. In 2016, the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) ruled in favour of the Philippines against China's claims over reefs and sea features and condemned its construction activities in contested waters (Carugati, 2021; Medina, 2017; Yar, 2019). Nevertheless, China's actions in the SCS have continued un-tempered as Beijing rejects both the authority of UNCLOS and the validity of the PCA's recent decisions.

China's activities in the SCS have also caused other countries to submit claims and statements to the UN Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf. In the first half of 2020, multiple statements were issued by SCS stakeholders, including Brunei, Malaysia, the Philippines, Vietnam, and several previously neutral non-claimant observers like Australia (Carugati, 2021; Medina, 2017). Additionally, at the 2018 Shangri-La Dialogue, Western officials, including those from the US, France, and the UK jointly issued condemnations of China's ongoing illegal maritime activities, and called for a joint task force on freedom of navigation in the SCS (Yar, 2019).

These dynamics in the SCS are significant, as the disputes have increasingly become a sort of bellwether signalling the health of the regional order and security governance rooted in principles of international law. Additionally, the SCS is an important area for other pragmatic reasons. Upwards of \$3.2 trillion USD in yearly global trade traverses these waters and they contain significant fisheries stocks and oil and gas reserves (Carugati, 2021; Yar, 2019). The SCS also serves as the gateway between the Pacific and Indian Oceans and is encircled by most of the ASEAN states. Canada's interests in the region are connected to these issues because the Canadian economy is tied closely to both China and ASEAN, and Canada benefits from a stable SCS in this regard. Hence, escalating maritime troubles in the region affect Canada's strategic interests as well as its diplomatic and economic interests.

The complex downstream effects of SCS tensions are mirrored in the concerns and interests of other regional actors as well. ASEAN states prefer to keep their own intra-regional relations amicable, but China's aggressive assertiveness can be disruptive for regional state-to-state relations. For example, Cambodia's support for China's rejection of UNCLOS sets it apart from other ASEAN members on these issues (Medina, 2017). Such divergent responses to Chinese "assertiveness" contribute to regional complexities that are stalling initiatives towards a functioning regional code of conduct on SCS navigation. On the other hand, China has an interest in maintaining peaceable relations with ASEAN states in other respects. China's "Wolf Warrior" approach to regional security in the SCS remains somewhat moderated by Beijing's long-game "charm offensive" in other regional economic and diplomatic relations. This includes efforts towards the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP); Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) projects in the region; and a preference for regional supply chains and access to regional markets (Chubb, 2020; Gong, 2020).

This brings us to the first analytical trap that Canadian policymakers can fall into, which is the tendency to over-simplify the "China Problem," both in terms of its nature and overall significance to Canada's relations with other regional actors. This over-simplification partly arises from the assumption that China's foreign policies are directed by

Beijing's security interests alone (Duan, 2022; Ndzendze, 2022). There is an urge to ascribe most, if not all, of Chinese state actions to a one-dimensional "rising China" script, where it seeks to establish itself aggressively as a hegemonic security actor in Southeast Asia, above all else (Carugati, 2021). The problem with this limited perspective is that it ignores how China's policy goals are also rooted in fostering mutual interdependence with ASEAN economies and a desire to be perceived as a good faith regional actor in that respect (Gong, 2020; Tsuyoshi, 2021). In other words, the Canadian perspective tends to over-emphasise the "Wolf Warrior" aspects of China's regional relations, and down-play China's "charm offensive" efforts to build positive relations in the region. Importantly, the latter is not necessarily a negative development insofar as it can contribute to a more stable region.

Another way that Canadian perspectives over-simplify the "China Problem" is a tendency to foreground concerns about China to the exclusion of other regional issues and players (Carugati, 2021; Carvin, 2021). Hyper-fixating on the threat of China in all of Canada's regional forays is arguably counter-productive. In this regard, the IPS seems to continue this tendency, which I discuss in the conclusion. Obviously, it remains important to take very seriously any actions of the Chinese state that threaten Canadian interests or Canadian values (Bondy, 2021; Tsuyoshi, 2021). There has been a legitimate loss of diplomatic trust following China's detention and abuse of Michael Kovrig and Michael Spavor, and the discovery of illicit Chinese state-run "police stations" operating in Canada. Tensions over Taiwan continue to be of genuine geopolitical concern and should not be ignored. Nevertheless, Ottawa must still recognize and seize opportunities for common ground with China in areas where that is possible, while also maintaining commitments to Canadian values, interests, and alliances (Reeves, 2020). These paths do not have to be mutually exclusive, and Canadian policymakers should resist the urge to red-line too many issues in China-Canada relations, especially where they are not required or likely to be unproductive.

Key security interest 2: mitigating great power rivalry

As discussed, it is important for Canada to resist fixating on China solely as a threat to regional security because this frame only shows part of the picture. This is because both China's "charm offensive" enmeshment in Southeast Asian economies *and* China's "Wolf Warrior" assertiveness in the SCS are central to Beijing's aims to project both its military and soft power (Chubb, 2020; Duan, 2022). And now, there is growing security and economic rivalry between the US and China, with observers increasingly referring to a "new Cold War" playing out in the region (Heydariyan, 2020; Khurana, 2018). The uncertainty that comes with this "new Cold War" framing does not benefit other regional stakeholders, including Canada. There is considerable convergence in Southeast Asia around maintaining stable relations between the Great Powers to facilitate a better security environment and positive trade and economic relationships in the broader region. Clearly, the regional preference is for reduced tensions between the Washington and Beijing.

Hence, the continued mitigation of Great Power rivalry in Southeast Asia represents another key regional security interest for Canada. Obviously, the Canadian instinct is to be on the "side" of Washington in matters of security. But how this plays out in practice is less clear-cut in the context of Canada's diplomatic and foreign relations in Southeast

Asia, which is why Canada needs to be less of a “tag along” actor with the US on regional security issues (Dewitt et al., 2018). This does not mean that Canada should abandon its security alliances or cosy up to the rivals and enemies of its most powerful ally. Nor does it mean that Ottawa should be naïve about the potential (in)effectiveness of deploying liberal forms of engagement with non-liberal actors like China (Tsuyoshi, 2021). Rather, it means that Ottawa should avoid unnecessarily limiting its own flexibility, manoeuvrability, and foreign policy options in a region where Canada is not even named once as a strategic partner in the entirety of Biden’s Indo-Pacific Strategy.

In this regard, Canada’s exclusion from AUKUS or “the Quad,” is not necessarily a damaging development. On AUKUS, as Carvin (2021) wryly notes, Canada does not need to be part of a side-pact on nuclear submarines to advance its interests in the Asia-Pacific, but Canada *does* need to better define what those regional interests actually *are*. Relatedly, what is easily missed in these discussions, is that being *included* in AUKUS could send the message that Ottawa’s leading goal in the region is to support American efforts to counter China militarily. For reasons already mentioned, this would not necessarily advance Canada’s own interests in moderating and mitigating Great Power rivalry in the region. For its part, “the Quad” plays a constitutive role in a distinctly American framing of the “Indo-Pacific,” which seeks to counter the “Asia-Pacific” framing of the region. Hence, for Canada, joining “the Quad” would imply signing on to this American vision of the “Indo-Pacific,” which underestimates both the complexity of China’s influence and the continued importance of ASEAN in the region (Buszynski, 2019).

This brings us to another common analytical trap that Canadian policymakers should avoid, which is getting pulled too tightly into the American framing of the region, which foregrounds Washington’s pre-occupation with strategically countering China to the possible detriment of broader regional stability. Arguably, *actively* band-wagoning with Washington in regional Great Power rivalry doesn’t align with Canada’s own interests in *reducing and mitigating* that rivalry. Rather, careful deployment of other forms of statecraft that can facilitate relationship-building across a range of issues will be more effective for Canadian interests than adopting a confrontational military posture in the region. Tsuyoshi (2021) calls this a “hedging” approach, whereby Canada’s China strategy would deploy “principles of strategic literacy, soft balancing, economic pragmatism, and prudent statecraft” that resides somewhere at the “mid-point” between the “equally unviable options” of aggressive confrontation and ineffective forms of diplomatic engagement. In terms of benefiting from such an approach, Canada and many members of ASEAN have more in common with each other in this regard, rather than with members of either AUKUS or “the Quad” (Evans, 2017).

Meanwhile, ASEAN states have always been wary of overt side-taking when it comes to the US and China, which is an approach that Canada could learn from in its regional security relations. As discussed further in the next section, Canada shares an interest with other regional stakeholders, in seeing the China–US relationship remaining productive (Carugati, 2021; Fitzgerald & Segal, 2021). Attempting to join AUKUS or “the Quad” could run counter to this desired outcome. It could also erode Canada’s already anaemic relations with ASEAN members, further reducing Ottawa’s opportunities to enjoy a more credible diplomatic status in the region (Fortier et al., 2022). This is why Canada could benefit from distinguishing its own regional interests from those of the Americans (Carugati, 2021; Carvin, 2021; Evans, 2017).

Key security interest 3: supporting an inclusive rules based regional order

Canada's third significant security interest in Southeast Asia resides in supporting a regional order that remains inclusive of ASEAN members and other "non-aligned" TAC nations. This is in keeping with Ottawa's broader commitments to an RBIO that values multilateralism across a diversity of state actors. Related to earlier points about mitigating Great Power rivalry, Canada's self-positioning as a good faith multilateral actor requires regional policies that are not solely designed to "counter" China on Washington's terms (Rashchupkina, 2022). Furthermore, Southeast Asian states increasingly also see the US as a potential threat to regional stability and the RBIO (Rashchupkina, 2022). Canada, for its part, is uniquely positioned in this context to take opportunities to collaborate with regional actors and seek areas of convergence on governance and security issues.

Underlying these goals is Canada's commitment to human security issues vis-à-vis Ottawa's self-declared feminist and rights-based foreign policies (Evans, 2017). These include positions of principle regarding the Rohingya genocide; the Myanmar coup; the oppression of the Uighurs in China; regional trans-national crime and terrorism; pandemic and disaster response; and various regional issues in WPS. In practice however, Canada's presence in regional human rights governance has been relatively lacklustre and/or ineffective. In fact, Ottawa's well-meaning determination to advance democratic values and liberal governance can be counter-productive in its execution, which continues to be a challenge for Canada's broader regional relations. Many Southeast Asian governments are not liberal democracies, while other ASEAN states are technically democratic, yet have illiberal governments that implement internal policies inimical to human rights. In this context, Ottawa still struggles to find consistent or productive strategies to engage regional actors on such issues, especially in ways that might actually change behaviour or encourage better practices. Canadian efforts in this regard are often ignored or seen as largely performative when contrasted with Canada's own behaviours like ignoring the gross human rights violations of other allies and trading partners; or failing to redress its own ongoing injustices against Indigenous peoples (Rashchupkina, 2022).

In this vein, Ottawa finds itself criticized both domestically and abroad for inconsistent human rights messaging and policies, begging the question of what Canada is seeking to achieve with its engagement in the region beyond symbolic condemnation in what Tsuyoshi (2021) calls practices of "naïve liberal engagement." Importantly, this is not an argument against attempting to advance human rights, but rather a caution that the way Ottawa tends to go about "advocating" for them does not actually improve conditions or contribute meaningfully to Canada's credibility or influence in the region. What Ottawa's performative diplomacy *does* tend to contribute to is increasing regional ambivalence towards Canadian involvement in regional forums.

This brings us to another analytical trap for Canadian policy makers, which is a recurring tendency to neglect (or fail to understand) the importance of fostering credible relations with ASEAN members and institutions. This requires Canada to take seriously, and remain responsive to, varied regional perspectives regarding the RBIO. Presently, ASEAN is at a crossroads with regards to members' self-conceptions about where they stand in the global community (Ratcliffe, 2022). Traditionally non-aligned and philosophically committed to a sacrosanct respect for sovereignty, regional actors have long felt stuck between "the rock and the hard-place" of the US and China (Noor, 2017). Following waning American

influence in the region, there is now growing acceptance- but also wariness- about China's escalating regional influence as a potential revisionist state aligned with a cadre of even more revisionist states like Russia. Southeast Asians know what it would mean to openly align themselves with the "side" that rejects the RBIO on matters like Russia's attacks on Ukraine. Nevertheless, ASEAN observers do not necessarily discount the *possibility* that aligning with China or Russia on such issues would be the better option (Loh & Mustaffa, 2022; Ratcliffe, 2022), which only becomes more attractive when the Anglo-American vision of the RBIO continually fails to include regional perspectives.

This ambivalence connects directly to regional experiences with European colonialism, Anglo-American geo-strategic interests, and the general decline of Anglo-American credibility on issues of international import (Loh & Mustaffa, 2022; Rashchupkina, 2022). Wariness and cynicism towards "the West," so widespread outside of the Anglosphere, is often underestimated by Canadian policy makers. Ottawa easily fails to account for this pervasive and widespread attitude of "anti-Western hegemony" where events like "the US-led intervention in Iraq in 2003 and the more recent ... withdrawal from Afghanistan, have solidified the view that the West tends to interfere with other nations with little or no consequences" (Loh & Mustaffa, 2022). Within this context, Canada will be unsuccessful in gaining the credibility required to engage productively in the region by leaning too heavily on a style of diplomacy that is likely to be received as sanctimonious and disingenuous by Southeast Asians.

That being said, in the battle to win over ASEAN and its members, the advantage has nevertheless always been held by what is widely understood to be the Anglo-American led RBIO. Despite "anti-Western" attitudes and the region's colonial history and patchy record of emerging democracy, ASEAN countries are generally *not* revisionist and there has long been a preference for an RBIO based in democratic principles and economic opportunities (Tan, 2022). But for all the reasons mentioned this historical bias towards (ostensibly liberal) multilateralism must not be taken for granted. Which is why Canada needs to actively improve its own relations with ASEAN and its members, and remember that the US is also regarded as a potential bad faith strategic actor by Southeast Asian observers. Canada is in a position to positively influence regional actors towards maintaining their connections to the RBIO, especially considering they all mostly share an interest in keeping China in check, as well.

Whither Canada-southeast Asian security relations?

There is evidence of renewed Canadian efforts in the Asia-Pacific and signs that Trudeau's government looks to invigorate Canada's regional profile. ASEAN states are increasingly viewed as important targets for strategic and political opportunity for Canada, building upon Ottawa's economic agenda and ongoing efforts to expand trade relations in the region. However, Canadian policymakers have tended to assume, in a paraphrase of Trudeau, that "Southeast Asia needs more Canada," when in fact the situation is largely reversed. For all the reasons discussed in this paper, Canada needs to strengthen its relationships with ASEAN as an institution and with its individual member states, wherever warranted. But overcoming the scepticism of ASEAN leaders towards Ottawa's intentions, commitment, and capacity to build and sustain long-term relationships remains a key challenge for Canada. Up to this point, Ottawa has taken these relationships for

granted, at its peril. Within this context, it is worth examining GAC's most recent policy document, set to guide Canadian forays into the region in the foreseeable future. In this concluding section I ask: *can Canada's 2022 "Indo-Pacific Strategy" (IPS) rise to the challenges outlined in this paper?* As mentioned, Canada has been left out of the US-led cadre of "like-minded middle powers" seeking to counter China, but being included in AUKUS and "the Quad" poses no real benefit to Canada and risks alienating ASEAN in the process. On the other hand, Canada would benefit from seeking membership in *regional* security institutions beyond its current designation as an ASEAN Dialogue Partner through the ARF. While this status is useful at the working committee level, the ARF has limited practical capacity and Canada has not advanced to the level of ASEAN *Strategic* Partner. Until now, Canada has been viewed as a distant player in regional security, and has never been invited to join the multilateral ADMM+ (defence ministers meeting) or the East Asia Summit, which are the more critical Track 1 regional security forums. It is encouraging then, that the 2022 IPS indicates that Canada will seek membership in both of those security forums, as well as advancement to the level of ASEAN Strategic Partner. With regards to building partnerships and increasing direct engagement with Southeast Asia, the IPS also reiterates Ottawa's "[deep] respect for the centrality of ASEAN in the region," and further promises to negotiate a Canada-ASEAN FTA and "Comprehensive Economic Partnership" with Indonesia; launch a "Canadian Trade Gateway" in Southeast Asia; strengthen Canadian diplomatic presence in the region; "increase security cooperation with ASEAN and its members"; and finally, align the IPS' goals with the "ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific" statement. These goals are worthy, but there is little indication of how they are going to be pursued and with what resource allocations. It will be interesting to see the IPS' alignments with federal budget expenditure priorities in this regard.

In terms of broader regional security, Canada has thus far remained engaged while also distancing itself in elegant ways from the more problematic aspects of American involvement in regional security, especially with regards to maritime policy. For example, Ottawa's regular regional military engagement includes ship visits and multinational naval exercises like RIMPAC, which are admittedly centred on American and Northeast Asian naval security. But Canada's own main strategic concern in the SCS is the maintenance of sea lines of communication. In this regard, the Royal Canadian Navy has been travelling through the SCS and Taiwan Straits to reinforce international rights of transit, but has thus far wisely distanced Canada from the allied Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPs) which involve much more confrontational practices like close travel near disputed islands. This subtle differentiation deserves mention, because it represents an example of drawing Canadian policy distinctions from Washington's, while simultaneously showing a willingness to engage in regional security concerns. More generally, this type of policy distinction can communicate Canada's earnest desire to advance an "open" doctrine in the wider region, no matter which nomenclature is ultimately deployed to describe it.

On this note, something to keep an eye on under the IPS' strategic objective of "promoting peace, resilience and security," is the eventual shape taken by plans to "enhance [Canada's] security and defence cooperation," and "augment [Canada's] naval presence." Under the former, the IPS promises that Canada will "commit additional resources" and "increase engagement in international exercises and operations" (p.15). Under the latter, Ottawa will increase deployment of naval frigates to conduct "forward naval presence operations" and "collaborative deployments with its allies and partners" (p. 15).

Although this falls short of implying future participation in FONOPs, it certainly leaves the door open to a shift in that direction and poses questions about the degree to which Canadian strategic engagement in the region might escalate in counter-productive ways. The answers may lie in Canada's next Defence Policy Update, which will need to be cross-referenced against the strategic objectives of the IPS.

Finally, it needs to be said that at first pass the 2022 IPS seems to represent an opening salvo in a new Canadian regional disposition that foregrounds and prioritizes the countering of China's influence. The document initially frames broader regional engagement around identifying China as an "increasingly disruptive global power" (p. 7) that requires navigating the degree to which global and regional actors have "complex and deeply intertwined relationships" with China. At the same time, while the IPS clarifies how Canada sees China as a threat to international norms and the RBIO, it also states that "China's sheer size and influence make cooperation necessary" (p.7). The IPS further reiterates this ambiguity by stating that Canada will challenge China in "areas of profound disagreement" while also finding mutual solutions to global problems, where possible. Within the context of these dualities, the IPS asserts a general re-evaluation of Canada's approach to China, operating across domestic, bilateral, regional, and multilateral spheres. In and of itself, this general goal is warranted but as with all of the rather protean objectives outlined in the IPS, the devil will be lurking in the details. It remains to be seen how Canada's regional policies will actually look in the coming years, or if successive Canadian governments will remain committed to the IPS. For now, China remains firmly positioned in the foreground of Canada's "Indo-Pacific" policies.

Ultimately, I still argue that Canada must actively articulate its own regional strategies and re-assert itself as a good faith regional actor through active engagement and cooperation with ASEAN on its own terms. Otherwise, Ottawa will not be successful in its ongoing efforts to uphold the RBIO in the region or help to mitigate Great Power rivalry. This is why renewing initiatives under the ASEAN-Canada Cooperation Agreement has never been more important and why the IPS' renewed commitments to Canada-ASEAN relations are promising. Canada should take seriously these renewed commitments to also practice more consistent involvement in regional governance by deploying longer-term strategies of diplomatic engagement across various tracks and scales. Some of the best work on human security and WPS issues, for example, is happening on Tracks 2 and 3 in regional forums like CSCAP, where communities of practice actually operate (Martel et al., 2022).

In conclusion, Canada needs to figure out who it wants to be in Southeast Asia. Under the auspices of potentially strengthened relationships through the IPS, Ottawa should seek to rebuild a regional reputation as a credible and honest broker of multilateral goals, which has been tarnished by years of neglect. To do so, Canada must resist the urge to hyperfixate on China or align itself too closely with the US' more confrontational military policies. Instead, Canada must engage meaningfully- and independently- with other regional middle-powers, individual ASEAN members, and regional organizations along various tracks. Canadian policy-makers could even take a lesson from ASEAN's focus on process and dialogue and avoid the tendency to performatively and ineffectively rush to red-line issues to the exclusion of other regional relations. The real danger is a collapse of the RBIO- not just because of the "rise of China" and the increasing influence of new challenges to the liberal international order, but because of what is widely seen as the waning credibility of so-called liberal internationalism, which was thin in the region to begin with.

Whichever ways Canada chooses to move forward with the strategic goals outlined in the IPS, Ottawa must keep in mind that ASEAN countries- despite being influenced by TAC, the NAM and pervasive suspicion of “the West”- probably do still want to align with the liberal democracies that seek to uphold the RBIO, for better or for worse. Canada can and arguably should contribute to those efforts, and it will be to all of our benefit.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributor

Jennifer Mustapha researches and teaches politics at Huron University College in London, Ontario. She is the author of *Writing Southeast Asian Security: Regional Security and the War on Terror after 9/11* (Routledge)

References

- Bondy, M. (2021). Excluded from AUKUS? Canada should seek to invite itself Aboard. *CIGI Articles Online* September 30 2021 <https://www.cigionline.org/articles/excluded-from-aukus-canada-should-invite-itself-aboard/>.
- Buszynski, L. (2019). Challenges to Southeast Asian Regionalism in 2018. *Southeast Asian Affairs, 2019*, 2–20. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26939683>.
- Carugati, R. (2021). From the South China Sea to the Arctic: Linking Canada’s Interests. *Hot Takes, Network for Strategic Analysis*, 25th October 2021 <https://ras-nsa.ca/publication/from-the-south-china-sea-to-the-arctic-linking-canadas-interests/>.
- Carvin, S. (2021). Beyond AUKUS: Canada may not need Nuclear Subs — but It Is in Dire Need of a Strategy. *CIGI Articles Online* October 18 2021 <https://www.cigionline.org/articles/beyond-aukus-canada-may-not-need-nuclear-subs-but-it-is-in-dire-need-of-a-strategy/>.
- Chubb, A. (2020). PRC assertiveness in the South China Sea: Measuring continuity and change, 1970–2015. *International Security, 45*(3), 79–121. https://doi.org/10.1162/isec_a_00400
- Darmawan, A. R. (2021). Reformulating ASEAN’s Outlook on the Indo-Pacific. *East Asia Forum* 29 September 2021. Online: <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2021/09/29/reformulating-aseans-outlook-on-the-indo-pacific/>.
- Dewitt, D., Young, M., Brouse, A., & Piereder, J. (2018). AWOL: Canada’s defence policy and presence in the Asia Pacific. *International Journal, 73*(1), 5–32. <https://doi.org/10.1177/002070201876>
- Duan, X. (2022). China’s strategic thinking on the Diaoyu/Senkaku Island Dispute. In M. de Souza, G. Coutaz, & D. Karalekas (Eds.), *Asian territorial and maritime disputes: A critical introduction* (pp. 65–83). E-International Relations.
- Evans, P. (2017). Elements of a Canadian strategy for Southeast Asia: The strategic relevance of ASEAN. In S. Martel & N. Truong (Eds.), *Southeast Asia in an evolving global landscape: Prospects for an integrated region and implications for Canada*. University of British Columbia. Online: <https://sppga.ubc.ca/wp-content/uploads/sites/5/2017/10/1SEA-26Oct2017.pdf>.
- Feng, H. (2018). Track 2 diplomacy in the Asia-Pacific: Lessons for the epistemic community. *Asia Policy, 13*(4), 60–66. <https://doi.org/10.1353/asp.2018.0063>
- Fitzgerald, A. M., & Segal, H. (2021). Why Canada should Embrace the Southeast Asian Imperative. *Royal United Services Institute Commentary* 18 Nov 2021 <https://rusi.org/explore-our-research/publications/commentary/why-canada-should-embrace-southeast-asia-imperative>.
- Fortier, M., Munier, M., & Massie, J. (2022). Towards a Canadian Strategy in the Indo-Pacific: What to learn from the American and European Examples? *Network for Strategic Analysis/ Publications*, 25th February 2022 <https://ras-nsa.ca/towards-a-canadian-strategy-in-the-indo-pacific-what-to-learn-from-the-american-and-european-examples/>.

- Gong, X. (2020). Non-traditional security cooperation between China and South-East Asia: Implications for indo-pacific geopolitics. *International Affairs*, 96(1), 29–48. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiz225>
- Heydarian, R. J. (2020). The new cold war: Sleep-walking into great power conflict. In R. J. Heydarian (Ed.), *The indo-pacific: Trump, China, and the new struggle for global mastery* (pp. 149–199). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Holland, K. (2021). Canada and the Indo-Pacific strategy. *Canadian Foreign Policy Journal*, 27(2), 228–250. <https://doi.org/10.1080/11926422.2021.1880949>
- Khurana, G. S. (2018). Trump’s new cold war alliance in Asia is dangerous. *New Perspectives Quarterly*, 35(1), 7–10. <https://doi.org/10.1111/npqu.12114>
- Loh, B. Y., & Mustaffa, M. (2022). Social Media Discourse in Malaysia on the Russia-Ukraine Conflict: Rationales for Pro-Russia Sentiments. ISEAS Commentary 2022/41 https://www.iseas.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/ISEAS_Perspective_2022_41.pdf.
- Lovely, M. E. (2022). A US Indo-Pacific framework that tries to build out China is unrealistic. *East Asia Forum* 10 April 2022 Online: <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2022/04/10/a-us-indo-pacific-framework-that-tries-to-build-out-china-is-unrealistic/>.
- Martel, S. (2020). The polysemy of security community-building: Toward a “people-centered” Association of Southeast Asian nations (ASEAN)? *International Studies Quarterly*, 64(3), 588–599. <https://doi.org/10.1093/isq/sqaa040>
- Martel, S., Mustapha, J., & Sharma, S. E. (2022). Women, peace and security governance in the Asia-Pacific: A multi-scalar field of discourse and practice. *International Affairs*, 98(2), 727–746. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ia/iiab228>
- Medina, C. P. (2017). Legal Victory for the Philippines against China: A Case Study. *Global Challenges Online Geneva Graduate Institute Issue 1: Feb 2017* <https://globalchallenges.ch/issue/1/legal-victory-for-the-philippines-against-china-a-case-study/#:~:text=The%20tribunal's%20ruling%20is%20certainly,is%20legally%20binding%20on%20China.>
- Miller, J. B. (2020). Canada’s Indo-Pacific Strategy: Towards a FOIP Framework?. CDA Institute. Online: <https://cdainstitute.ca/j-berkshire-miller-canadas-indo-pacific-strategy-towards-a-foip-framework/>.
- Mitchell, P. T. (2021). Canada’s exclusion from the AUKUS security pact reveals a failing national defence policy. *The Conversation Online* September 21 2021 <https://theconversation.com/canadas-exclusion-from-the-aukus-security-pact-reveals-a-failing-national-defence-policy-168235>.
- Mustapha, J. (2019). *Writing southeast Asian security: Regional security and the war on terror after 9-11*. Routledge.
- Ndzendze, B. (2022). Understanding China’s ‘new’ assertiveness from resolved territorial questions. In M. de Souza, G. Coutaz, & D. Karalekas (Eds.), *Asian territorial and maritime disputes: A critical introduction* (pp. 178–193). E-International Relations.
- Noor, E. (2017). Stuck between a rock and a hard place: Managing great power competition. In S. Martel & N. Truong (Eds.), *Southeast Asia in an evolving global landscape: Prospects for an integrated region and implications for Canada*. University of British Columbia. Online: <https://sppga.ubc.ca/wp-content/uploads/sites/5/2017/10/1SEA-26Oct2017.pdf>.
- Raaymakers, S. (2021). Why is Canada Missing from the Indo-Pacific. *The Diplomat* (Online) October 25, 2021 <https://thediplomat.com/2021/10/why-is-canada-missing-from-the-indo-pacific/>.
- Rashchupkina, Y. (2022). Canadian foreign politics: Is there any chance of making headway in preserving the liberal international order? *Canadian Foreign Policy Journal*, 28(2), 180–190. <https://doi.org/10.1080/11926422.2022.2033286>
- Ratcliffe, R. (2022). A leader of the world’: south-east Asian countries open to Putin pivot. *The Guardian* (Online) September 9, 2022 <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/sep/09/russia-south-east-asian-countries-open-to-putin-pivot>.
- Reeves, J. (2020). *Canada As A 21 St Century Pacific Power - Toward ‘Broad Diversification In Asia*, Asia Pacific Foundation of Canada Report https://www.asiapacific.ca/sites/default/files/publication-pdf/canada_as_a_21st_century_pacific_power_web_version_1.pdf.
- Tan, M.-W. (2022). Singapore may have little influence on US-China relations, but we can keep region ‘open & inclusive’: Lawrence Wong. *Mothership News* (Online) October 7 2022 <https://mothership.sg/2022/10/wong-futurechina-forum-speech-2022/>.

- Tsuyoshi, K. (2021). Hedging against China: Formulating Canada's new strategy in the era of power politics. *Canadian Foreign Policy Journal*, 27, 175–193. <https://doi.org/10.1080/11926422.2021.1901755>
- Turcsanyi, R. Q. (2017). What's Really Behind Chinese Assertiveness in the South China Sea? *The Diplomat*, Dec 22 2017 <https://thediplomat.com/2017/12/whats-really-behind-chinese-assertiveness-in-the-south-china-sea/>.
- Yar, I. (2019). Why Should Canada Care about the South China Sea? *Inside Policy Columns*, Macdonald Laurier Institute Online April 9 2019 <https://macdonaldlaurier.ca/canada-care-south-china-sea-irfan-yar-inside-policy/>.
- Zhu, Z. (2020). Interpreting China's 'Wolf-Warrior' Diplomacy'. *The Diplomat (Online)* May 15 2020 <https://thediplomat.com/2020/05/interpreting-chinas-wolf-warrior-diplomacy/>.