Canada can be a significant player in the Asia-Pacific

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Canada used to punch above its weight in the Asia-Pacific region. Starting in the 1970s, and continuing into the 80s and 90s, Canada’s relations in the region were a priority. We actively courted the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), were active in participating in the ASEAN Plus Dialogues, the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), and were at the founding of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum. In 1997, Canada hosted the APEC Summit in Vancouver, a meeting unfortunately more remembered for pepper-spray protests than any significant achievements. That seemed to somehow mark the high point in Canada’s political and trade engagement with Asia. We went from punching above our weight to being barely in the ring.

A new study from the Canadian Defence & Foreign Affairs Institute asks the question, is it time for Canada to reorient itself from a predominately Euro-centric nation to a nation with a more significant Asia-Pacific presence? The answer is a resounding yes – and the time to act is now.

As Canada has faded into the background of the Asia-Pacific region, the face of Canada has continued to change. Strong immigration patterns from Asia have altered the face and make-up of Canadian society. In 2006, among the more than 1.1 million recent immigrants who arrived between 2001 and 2006, 58.3% were born in Asian countries, including the Middle East. Fully 14% of recent immigrants who arrived between 2001 and 2006 came from the People’s Republic of China (PRC), followed by India (11.6%) the Philippines (7%) and Pakistan (5.2%), just as in 2001.

Globalization has led to the establishment of a large network of Canadian passport holders abroad, many in Asia. At the same time, driven by an economic slowdown, plus new trade and logistic barriers in its traditional market — the United States — Canadian business and industry is focusing more attention across the Pacific.

Despite at least a decade and a half of relative neglect, including a calculated snub of China by the Harper government early in its mandate, it seems that things may be changing – and none too soon.

The Prime Minister’s current trip to China marks an important step now that a better balance of interests versus values has been struck by Canadian policy-makers. While the Beijing visit is welcome and timely, an Asia-Pacific strategy must go beyond a knee-jerk playing of the “China card” as an alternative to the US market for oil products, minerals or lumber. Canada’s return to Asia needs to extend beyond China.

Our belated discovery of the Trans-Pacific partnership (TPP) is an important element in this. Prime Minister Harper was informed during his bilateral meeting with President Obama that the hoped for approval of the Keystone XL Pipeline would be significantly delayed beyond the 2012 election. To sweeten this bitter pill, Obama let it be known that if Canada publicly announced an expression of interest in the TPP, it would elicit a positive U.S. response.

As negotiations proceed it remains to be seen whether Canada is really ready to adopt the TPP’s “dress code”, which means signing on to a comprehensive (no sectors excluded) agreement with gold-standard investment, Intellectual Property Rights, and other provisions. This will not be easy for Canada, but it appears as if the government is prepared to try, given the heavy lobbying that is going on in Washington, and that will take place soon in other TPP capitals.
Given Canada’s inability to date to conclude any trade agreements with countries in Asia, this apparent commitment to joining the TPP is to be welcomed. The Prime Minister’s visit could be the first step in a longer term strategy to revive Canada’s role and presence in the Asia-Pacific arena. We have allowed a strong legacy and natural advantages to be squandered through neglect, but a return to the ring is better late than never. Now is the time to move.

Let us refocus and re-energize and bring Canada back to its rightful place as a significant player in the Asia-Pacific.