



**CANADIAN GLOBAL AFFAIRS INSTITUTE**  
**INSTITUT CANADIEN DES AFFAIRES MONDIALES**

# **Canada and the Indo-Pacific: A Need for a Strategic Course**

by Jonathan Berkshire Miller  
March 2021

# POLICY PERSPECTIVE

---

## **CANADA AND THE INDO-PACIFIC: A NEED FOR A STRATEGIC COURSE**

by Jonathan Berkshire Miller

March 2021



CANADIAN GLOBAL AFFAIRS INSTITUTE  
INSTITUT CANADIEN DES AFFAIRES MONDIALES

Prepared for the Canadian Global Affairs Institute  
1800, 150 – 9th Avenue S.W., Calgary, AB T2P 3H9  
[www.cgai.ca](http://www.cgai.ca)

©2021 Canadian Global Affairs Institute  
ISBN: 978-1-77397-173-5



**T**he Indo-Pacific, as a geographic concept that connects the vast Indian and Pacific oceans, along with the states in between, is not a new geostrategic idea. Indeed, the notion of a broader geographic region – rather than more traditional subsets such as East Asia, South Asia or the more expansive Asia-Pacific – has been used for more than a decade by scholars and practitioners in the region. An Indian naval captain began using the concept in geopolitical terms more than a decade ago, but the terminology has not been limited to scholars in Delhi. Japan’s former prime minister, Shinzo Abe, during his first term in 2007, [spoke to India’s parliament](#) about his country’s vision for the Indo-Pacific, noting a “confluence of the two seas”. He stressed a need to transcend the traditional frameworks that often separated or minimized the geopolitical connections between South Asia and the Indian Ocean region with that of East Asia and the Pacific.

While others have since developed Indo-Pacific approaches, it is crucial to remember that the intellectual origins of this kind of strategic thinking came from the region – especially from policy-makers and officials from Japan, India and Australia – and will largely continue to evolve based on the strategic interests and resulting policy approaches from regional states. That said, other states invested in the Indo-Pacific, but direct residents have also been developing approaches in recent years, including the United States, Germany, France, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands and others. These approaches, while not identical and obviously premised on unique national interests, largely converge on a range of shared pillars – principally the respect for maintaining a rules-based system in the region that prioritizes a peaceful settlement of disputes and follows international law. All of these approaches also underscore the importance of open and transparent infrastructure development in the region so as not to burden donor-recipient countries in the region with heavy debt based on infrastructure projects that don’t serve their long-term interests.

Understanding the regional origins of the Indo-Pacific concept, including its articulation as a Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) first introduced by Japan, is essential to modify an incorrect – yet often stated – framing that FOIP is merely a hard-stick tool created by the United States and aimed at curtailing China’s rise. This narrative, which is often spun by detractors who don’t see the value in Canada following through on an Indo-Pacific strategy, misses the complexities of other states in the region and their shared interest in FOIP principles which are often aligned, but not completely congruent, with those of the United States.

For Canada, the idea of framing the region in Indo-Pacific terms is in its nascent stage of development. Traditionally, the lens with which the region has been looked at is that of the “Asia-Pacific”. This traditional framing is understandable to some extent considering that the history and focal points of Canadian engagement have been premised on the multilateral forums through which it is engaged. Examples of this include Canada being a founding member of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) and the Asian Development Bank (ADB). Canada also is a longstanding dialogue partner with the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and a member of the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF). More recently, Canada has joined other organizations, including the Asian Infrastructure and Investment Bank (AIIB).



This multilateral underpinning of Canada’s engagement to date has been decidedly “Asia-Pacific” in its focus for the past several decades. Yet it has become increasingly clear that, while many forums which Canada traditionally engages in remain relevant, its approach to the region is antiquated and needs significant policy evolution. Some detractors might argue that Canada should not look at developing an Indo-Pacific approach because it would betray our commitment and experience to organizations and partnerships centred around the Asia-Pacific, such as ASEAN and its related bodies. The short answer to these critiques however is that the development of an Indo-Pacific approach, in line with the principles of a free and open region, is not mutually exclusive or meant to replace our traditional engagement in the region. To the contrary, the development of an Indo-Pacific approach – which is currently being developed in Ottawa – would complement and outline strategically, and ideally with clarity, the stakes and interests Canada has in this pivotal region.

This telegraphing of a strategic purpose for Ottawa in the region is of utmost importance to alter long-held – and often-deserved – perceptions from key regional stakeholders that Canada is largely disinterested in the geostrategic evolutions and fast-changing dynamics of the Indo-Pacific. In this sense, the public diplomacy articulating the “why and how” behind its new strategy will be equally as important as the tangible deliverables and priority action areas being built into the approach.

### **The Role for Canada in the Indo-Pacific**

How should Canada become more involved in the emerging Indo-Pacific framework? First, Canada must assertively and unapologetically promote its interests and values in the region – most of which align closely with its key partners there such as the U.S., Japan and others. For example, if one dives into the FOIP policies by Washington and Tokyo, they will find more convergence than divergence with regard to Canadian interests. The U.S. strategy [stresses the need](#) to “promote transparency, openness, rule of law, and the protection of human rights and fundamental freedom”. Tokyo meanwhile stresses the importance of peace and stability in the region through common rules, open investment and the provision of international public goods. Most would agree these are rules and norms that Canada also subscribes to. A corollary to this is that greater engagement with the Indo-Pacific would help us further national areas of excellence desperately needed in the region’s approach to preventive diplomacy, such as women, peace and security.

However, it would be incorrect to think that the Indo-Pacific concept only appeals to a handful of states concerned about the rise of China and its often revisionist approach to the region. In fact, several states both inside and on the peripheries of the Indo-Pacific have demonstrated a definite interest in developing a strategic approach to the region. In addition to longstanding interest from “resident” powers such as Japan, India and Australia, there has also been a steady uptick of interest from countries further afield including those in Europe. In the past year, several countries



have either developed or released approaches to the Indo-Pacific region, including France, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom and Germany.

Second, Canada can manage both an effective and pragmatic relationship with China and simultaneously enhance its engagement with the Indo-Pacific region. Beijing may be wary of the framing of the Indo-Pacific, because of its tense relations with Washington under the Trump administration, but it would be incorrect to label the different national approaches as a containment strategy aimed at China. Rather than alliance politics, this is a loose grouping of like-minded and progressive states that are standing up for a prosperous and stable region that follows rules and maintains a sustainable trajectory – not to benefit one, but for the region as a whole. This is something Canada should stand up for, and it should not let its recent bilateral difficulties with Beijing distract it from the larger strategic dynamics playing out in the region.

Finally, just as engaging China and the Indo-Pacific framework are not mutually exclusive, so are the fundamentals of our existing engagements in the region. Ottawa will continue to be a key part of APEC, the ARF, ADB and other multilateral organizations – with ASEAN at the core – but it need not pursue this road in isolation from co-operation that makes sense with regional partners and allies in the broader Indo-Pacific. In fact, ASEAN has also produced an Indo-Pacific outlook which prioritizes many of the same values and interests – the respect for international law and the peaceful settlement of disputes – that other regional approaches address.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations:**

Despite a long history of engagement, the consistency of Canada's role often appears unmoored and not fully aligned with our interests and stakes in the significant geopolitical shifts taking place in the region. A frequent critique from stakeholders and officials in the region is that Canada must make a more consistent and comprehensive approach that demonstrates an investment of time and capital that goes beyond merely trade and investment. Specifically, there is a need and desire – at least from most states – for a strong Canadian voice on political security developments in the region, be it on maritime security, nuclear non-proliferation or humanitarian assistance and disaster relief. This is where the tenets, rules and values that form the basis of the emerging growth of Indo-Pacific frameworks will help Canada better serve its interests and promote its role.

In order to re-orient our role and position in the region, Canada will first need to answer two fundamental questions. The first question that any senior Canadian policy-maker will ask when thinking about deeper engagement relates to why we need to devote scarce resources to the Indo-Pacific. The second related question should be a more reflective one on why the region needs Canada. In sum, Canada must find a balance between the answers to these two questions – it must be in the region because it is in Canada's interest to have more meaningful engagement for a variety of reasons (to support a rules-based order, international law and to ensure this centre of geo-economic and geostrategic gravity is not ruled through coercion but based on accepted laws and norms). However, Canada must also carefully assess and attend to – as best as possible – the



needs, concerns and realities of its partners in the region rather than singularly focusing on how it wants to contribute.

With this in mind, there are a number of positive steps forward. These moves must encompass both our economic and security interests (although this section will only focus on the latter). First, it will be important for Canada to visualize its strategic approach to the region through an open and widely distributed strategy. The process of developing an Indo-Pacific strategy is already underway and considerable thought is being put into its formulation. However, the implementation and distribution stages are equally important. Canada should try its best to put maximum political weight behind the strategy and its release, ideally through a keynote speech at a key regional event such as the Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore, to signify to the region that its Indo-Pacific approach is not just another bureaucratic document.

Second, with a strategic guidance marker in hand – Canada should look carefully for opportunities that make sense for it to become more intertwined with the growing regional groupings. As noted earlier, this will include stepped-up engagement in the current multilateral forums but also finding more opportunities to engage with mini-lateral partners. One example is to build off Canada’s defence co-ordination with the U.S. and Japan. In 2019, the two sides commenced a second round of bilateral naval drills dubbed Kaedex (“kaede” meaning maple leaf in Japanese). The Canadian navy also participates as a trilateral participant in the U.S.-Japan Keen Sword naval exercises. Similarly, Canada has also been working with Japan, and other allies in the Five Eyes intelligence network, to help monitor and disrupt attempts by North Korea to evade sanctions over its nuclear and missiles programs – through surveillance of ship-to-ship transfers in the East China Sea.

Third, Canada should look at ways to become more involved in active defence diplomacy through maintaining and increasing its engagement in regional summits such as the Shangri-La Dialogue, the Asia-Pacific Roundtable, the Ulaanbaatar Dialogue and other track 1.5 meetings. These meetings provide another opportunity for Ottawa to signal the growing importance it attaches to the region. While resource issues always remain a concern, it is possible to defray some effort for these engagements to a growing number of intellectuals and academics in Canada who are focused on the Indo-Pacific region. Complementing participation in these dialogues is the welcome uptick of the Royal Canadian Navy in the region and its participation in port visits and regional exercises.

Increasing and visualizing these engagements under the chapeau of a new Indo-Pacific strategy will form a crucial step in deepening Canada’s commitment and ties in the region in the long term.

## ► About the Author

---

**Jonathan Berkshire Miller** is an international affairs professional with expertise on security, defense, intelligence and geo-economic issues in the Indo-Pacific. He has held a variety of positions in the private and public sector. Currently, he is a senior fellow with the Japan Institute of International Affairs (JIIA). Miller is also director and senior fellow of the Indo-Pacific program at the Ottawa-based Macdonald Laurier Institute, Senior Fellow on East Asia for the Tokyo-based Asian Forum Japan and the Director and co-founder of the Council on International Policy.

Previously, he was an international affairs fellow with the Council on Foreign Relations, based in Tokyo. Jonathan also held a fellowship on Japan with the Pacific Forum CSIS from 2013-16. At the Pacific Forum CSIS, he chaired a ten-member group focused on Japan-Korea relations, in the context of the US “rebalance” to Asia. Other former appointments and roles include terms as a Distinguished Fellow with the Asia-Pacific Foundation of Canada, and Senior Fellow on East Asia for the New York-based EastWest Institute.

Miller has held a number of other visiting fellowships on Asian security matters, including at JIIA and the National Institute of Defense Studies (Ministry of Defense - Japan). In addition, Miller previously spent nearly a decade in the public sector in Canada working on geopolitical and security issues pertaining to the Asia-Pacific.

He regularly attends track 1.5 and track 2 dialogues across the Asia-Pacific region on security and intelligence issues, and is one of Canada's representatives on the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) Eminent and Expert Persons Group. He also regularly provides advice and presents to universities, corporations, multilateral organizations and government on regional geopolitics.

## ► **Canadian Global Affairs Institute**

---

The Canadian Global Affairs Institute focuses on the entire range of Canada's international relations in all its forms including (in partnership with the University of Calgary's School of Public Policy), trade investment and international capacity building. Successor to the Canadian Defence and Foreign Affairs Institute (CDFAI, which was established in 2001), the Institute works to inform Canadians about the importance of having a respected and influential voice in those parts of the globe where Canada has significant interests due to trade and investment, origins of Canada's population, geographic security (and especially security of North America in conjunction with the United States), social development, or the peace and freedom of allied nations. The Institute aims to demonstrate to Canadians the importance of comprehensive foreign, defence and trade policies which both express our values and represent our interests.

The Institute was created to bridge the gap between what Canadians need to know about Canadian international activities and what they do know. Historically Canadians have tended to look abroad out of a search for markets because Canada depends heavily on foreign trade. In the modern post-Cold War world, however, global security and stability have become the bedrocks of global commerce and the free movement of people, goods and ideas across international boundaries. Canada has striven to open the world since the 1930s and was a driving factor behind the adoption of the main structures which underpin globalization such as the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, the World Trade Organization and emerging free trade networks connecting dozens of international economies. The Canadian Global Affairs Institute recognizes Canada's contribution to a globalized world and aims to inform Canadians about Canada's role in that process and the connection between globalization and security.

In all its activities the Institute is a charitable, non-partisan, non-advocacy organization that provides a platform for a variety of viewpoints. It is supported financially by the contributions of individuals, foundations, and corporations. Conclusions or opinions expressed in Institute publications and programs are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of Institute staff, fellows, directors, advisors or any individuals or organizations that provide financial support to, or collaborate with, the Institute.