

Canada's Indo-Pacific Strategy: A Postcolonial Review

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Abstract

Since the announcement of the Canadian Indo-Pacific Strategy in November 2022, a myriad of scholarship and policy discussions have emerged. This policy review provides an overview of new scholarly and policy discussions (2022-2024) of Canada's Indo-Pacific Strategy and considers key areas missing within the debates. Through a postcolonial lens, this review provides a preliminary critique of current discussions of the Strategy, initiating a critical reflection on Canadian foreign policy in the Indo-Pacific.

Keywords: Indo-Pacific, Postcolonial Theory, Canadian Foreign Policy.

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The 2022 Canadian Indo-Pacific Strategy (CIPS) represents Canada's renewed interest in the Asian region – formalizing a 10-year framework of Canadian engagement in the region. Celebrated as a "generational shift" in Canadian foreign policy, the CIPS underscores Canada's plans to diversify its global policy pathways for fostering economic growth, trade and security, in a rapidly evolving international landscape, marked not only by China's increasing influence and waning US's dominance (Nagy, 2023), but of emerging markets and strategic actors in the Indo-Pacific region. Making up 50% of the world's GDP, the Indo-Pacific region is Canada's second largest export market behind the United States (GAC, 2024). Leveraging partnerships and opportunities in the region is deemed pivotal for bolstering Canada's mandates to promote itself as a "top destination for global investment" and securing critical global supply chains in the interest of Canada (PMO, 2021).

The IPS names five objectives of 1) promoting peace, resilience, and security, 2) expanding trade, investment, and supply chain resilience, 3) investing in and connecting people, 4) building a sustainable and green future and for 5) Canada as an active and engaged partner to the Indo-Pacific." (GAC, 2022, p. 5) – promising "a new horizon of opportunity" that strengthens "Canadian national interest" through advancing "shared interests" with the Indo-Pacific (GAC, 2022, p. 5). The Strategy, explicitly naming "ASEAN Centrality" (PMO, 2024) as one of its core principles cites the stability of Southeast Asian countries as fundamentally tied to Canada's economic and military security in the region (PMO, 2024). The ASEAN region is Canada's fourth largest export partner, amounting to 38.8 billion in bilateral trade in 2023 alone (PMO, 2024) with a relatively young and expanding middle-class population – it is recognized as both an economic hub and geographical center for navigating global relations with giants like China and India (Ostwald, 2024). Global Affairs Canada (2024) reports that CIPS has secured 2.3 billion over five years, funding 24 initiatives, mostly involving key projects in and with Southeast Asian countries, such as trade agreements with Indonesia and ASEAN through the Canada-Indonesia Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA) and Canada-ASEAN Free Trade Agreement (p. 14). His Majesty Canadian Ships (HMCS) and dark vessel surveillance technologies are also deployed to counter illegal fishing and maritime activities in the South China Sea (GAC, 2024, p.3).

Canadian policy experts and scholars have responded in critique to the Strategy, particularly concerned with its lack of distinction from its American counterpart, taking a hostile and confrontational stance towards China, and the absence of a clear rationale that justifies engagement with the Indo-Pacific region. This policy review contents that the critiques, while important, address only surface-level policy shortcomings and limitations. Scholarly observations adopt a state-centric ontology in examining the CIPS, which I will show later in this review, evident in its sustaining of a Canada versus China rhetoric, framing international relations as a contest between self-interested

states produces knowledges that reduces the CIPS to a narrow policy project aimed at securing Canadian interests on the global stage, while overlooking its broader implications and intersections.

Yet, as postcolonial IR scholars Anna M. Agathangelou and LHM Ling (2009) write, international relations are never defined by the static state, rather constituted and underpinned by "relational-materialist forces", fundamentally interconnected and historically rooted with political structures and power relationships (p. 97,122). Leaning onto this postcolonial perspective, this policy review examines global relations through a relational lens, situating the CIPS's entanglements with sustained histories of coloniality and capitalism. This review article spotlights postcolonial observations of the Indo-Pacific Strategy to recast *the CIPS not simply as a product of misguided policies or oversimplified views on global relations but as a reflection of Canada's deeper entanglements in a Western-dominated world order*—one that continues to perpetuate global structural inequalities and hierarchies, particularly in the Global South. By interrogating these structural underpinnings, the review provokes deeper critical reflection in its reader towards re-orienting Canada's engagements in the Indo-Pacific.

Engaging China

The CIPS accuses China as "an increasingly disruptive global power" (GAC, 2022. P. 7) hinged on disregarding international laws, militarizing the Asian region, and advancing economic interests that "increasingly depart" from Canada. Mentioned 51 times, China is the most cited country in the Strategy (Hanson, 2023, p.3), highlighting Canada's anxieties over the rise of China in the region. With escalating military involvement in the South China Sea and the Taiwan Straits as context, the Strategy pledges a Canadian response strengthening defense capacities for safeguarding Canadian investments and cybersystems from foreign interference, advancing a "rules-based approach" deterring cohesive behaviors that violates international norms (GAC, 2022. p.8).

Scholarship importantly critiqued the CIPS's oversimplification of China's role in the region, cautioning a hostile and confrontational stance against China. Paul Evans warns against "binary oppositions of good and evil" (Evans, 2023, p. 205), asserting that such stance undermines Canada's possibilities for broader and more nuanced diplomacies. It overlooks the deep diplomatic and economic relations between China and Southeast Asian states that can risk alienating relations with ASEAN countries that have no interest in containing China (Evans, 2023, p. 205). Evans thus, proposes a multi-alignment approach that aligns with ASEAN, involving a flexible "hedging, bandwagoning and neutrality" that allows Canada to work with multiple and even contending partners in the region (Evans, 2023, p. 205), expanding Canada's interests on trade diversification and the governing of international law in the Indo-Pacific region. Along similar lines, Jennifer Mustapha highlights that the CIPS's narrow framings of China as an inherently aggravating actor is a result of "bandwagoning with Washington" - which explains Canada's fixations on China's Wolf Warrior Diplomacy policies such as China's assertive territorial claims over Spratly Islands, Paracel Islands and One China Policy (Mustapha, 2023, p. 180). Mustapha posits that while China's aggressiveness should not be ignored, Canada must be conscious of its positionalities within the regional order. For the ASEAN region, Canada is only a distant player and was neither engaging with key regional agreements such as the ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting (ADMM) Summit nor considered an ASEAN Strategic Partner (Mustapha, 2023, p. 184). Canada, therefore, needs more than a countering China policy grounded in reason for international norms and values to inform credible partnerships with the Indo-Pacific region, articulated upon clear Canadian interest in Southeast Asia, which she notes, has been vague. Mustapha, therefore, calls to policy makers to look to China's long history of diplomatic and economic tendencies as a start to engaging China, and to practice hedging that finds a mid-point between military confrontations and unproductive diplomatic alignments (2023, p. 181).

Shaun Narine offers a sharper rejection of the CIPS, contending that the strategy is a mere "lip service", "catering to the United States" (Narine, 2023, p.185), and endorsing Canada's participation in escalating tensions with China in region. The CIPS, as Narine denounces, exemplifies Western hypocrisy - singling out China as a violator of international regulations and an aggressor whilst disregarding years of Western powers militarizing the global, aggravating legitimate security concerns for China (Narine, 2023, p. 189). Narine counters such Western portrayals by pointing out to China's active multi-lateral engagements such as its application to the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) and its status as the largest trading partner to 128 out of 190 states globally. China, as Narine reaffirms, wants a peaceful liberal international economic system that is more beneficial for its long-term economic interests (Narine, 2023, p. 188). John Price with Noam Chomsky argues that China's disruption lies in its capacities to challenge the Western empire in Asia (2022). The CIPS rather than engaging existing regional initiatives such as the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) or the Asia-Pacific Trade Agreement (APTA) that has proven to facilitate regional relations, Canada following the US "charts a parallel agenda" through the CPTPP deliberately excluding China under the guise of a rules-based order that works to stomp out relations between Asian countries (Price and Chomsky, 2022).

Policy-makers behind the CIPS witness global politics as a zero-sum competition, where a China different from the West can only be antagonistic and disruptive to fit into the West's anarchic views of the global order, warranting deployment of responses attempted at refuting the CIPS's militarized strategies and weapons. However, scholarly critiques remain invested in a policy that is reluctant to drop militarized language (e.g. hedging, balancing), and refusing to reimagine global relations beyond a Western-centric engagement that sustains global hierarchies. The scholarship is adamant that any intrusions by the Chinese state should still warrant strong confrontations and tamed by Western regimes. And while the

scholarship frowns upon Canada's rules-based approach as simplistic and "bad for business" for enhancing economic and diplomatic relations, evades a closer look at deeper historical and structural forces that implicate relations between the Western world and Asia. How did Canada come to aligned with the US in engaging with China in the first place? Inquiries as such is needed to dig deeper into underpinning logics that drives Canada alignment with the US that leads to its casting of an anti-China rhetoric. On the flip side, scholarship critiquing the Western-dominated international order slips into romanticizing China as beacon of resistance to the West. Such perspectives neglect the reality that China is a global power that participates in reinforcing global inequalities to its benefit – such as the Belt Road Initiative that raises questions on China's participation in reinforcing extractive economic models and debt dependency across the Global South (Murray, 2023; Harrell, 2021).

Perhaps, as LHM Ling theorizes, the Westphalian education deeply rooted in North American IR scholarship has limited our abilities to articulate another possibility for engaging China (Ling, 2013, p.557). The Westphalian IR worldview defines world politics through a homogenous state existing in a Hobbesian state of Nature, always weary of an alien state's intrusion. Thus, forging a dichotomous-Manichean ontology that sees global relations as binary – between self and others, friend and foe. China under the Western gaze can only be with suspicion, a self-interested state only out to maximize power, a competitor of the West global domination (Ling, 2013, p.553). Responding to the US Indo-Pacific Strategy, postcolonial scholar Sheila Nair (2023) asserts that the IPS is a projection of US-Western fantasizes and anxieties over China. The IPS evoking a rules-based discourse serves to reconstruct China as a threat (normalized on Manichean IR worldviews) allowing for the US and its allies to reinsert themselves in the region as the arbiter of relations in Asia while downplaying the disempowerment of postcolonial states and their capacities to foster regional relations on their own terms (p. 89).

Suggestions of hedging and soft balancing as a panacea for Canada reflects scholarly tendencies bound by anxious assumptions of Canada as a state under threat – internalizing anxieties of a US-Western hegemony disrupted. As Andrew Horn (2020) agrees with Ling, such anxieties are rendered by temporal imaginaries of an uncertain anarchy that pushes the Western world into a “frantic” recalculation of power politics that locks states in a “reactive rather than directive” (p. 118) approach to fostering global relations. By remaining entrenched in these reactive logics, Canada projects a worldview that prioritizes containment, rendering alignment with US rationales despite realities that jeopardize broader relations in the region. To break free from these constraints, ongoing scholarship aimed at fostering Canada-China relations must critically decenter the Westphalian-anarchic worldview that limits global relations as only possible and legitimate between states. Instead, scholars must adopt pluralistic ontologies recognizing global relations as constituted by peoples and communities across worlds, transcending restrictive anarchy-driven underpinnings of traditional IR frameworks (Nordin and Smith, 2018; Ling, 2014). Future scholarship must pose critical questions: What are some key sustaining people-to-people interactions or relations between communities (e.g. transnational feminist movements, post and anti-war solidarity movements, Chinese-Indigenous interactions) in China and Canada? How can these interactions be scaled and implemented to foster meaningful and sustainable global connections? In this way, can critical scholarship generate actionable praxis to promote enduring Canada-China global relations.

An Indo-Pacific Rationale

The CIPS's enormous fixations on containing China has left the Strategy deficient in articulating a broader vision and coherent rationale for engaging with the Indo-Pacific region. Shubham Verma observes that Canada's Indo-Pacific rationale is centered almost entirely on containing China, with no distinct strategy beyond aligning itself with the U.S.-led FOIP (Free and Open Indo-Pacific) framework.

Canada's FOIP framework emphasizes "open" and "free" trade and navigation, supplemented by its commitment to affirming international law. However, it lacks a uniquely Canadian approach sufficiently convincing for reliable engagement with the region (Verma, 2023, p. 409). Such is a stark contrast to other Indo-Pacific strategies. Australia's IPS vision focuses on its interest in connecting with the Indian Ocean to protect sea lanes of communications and energy security (Verma, 2023, p. 409). Japan's IPS, grounded in its "two-seas" approach, outlines goals to enhance trade flow between the Indian and Pacific Oceans, fracturing previous strategic lines such as China's Maritime Silk Road and US's Pacific Pivot towards binding together trade flows with strong economies like Singapore, Indonesia, India and Australia, Africa and Middle Eastern countries (Verma, 2023, p. 405).

Jeffrey Reeves warns that the absence of a clear Indo-Pacific imperative or a reinterpretation of an FOIP framework unique for Canada, risks positioning Canada as merely a subordinated ally to the United States. This perception undermines credible relations with Indo-Pacific countries that are weary of the Indo-Pacific and FOIP as grand Strategy plans that prioritize great power competition, staging the region as a theatre for Cold War politics while sidelining regional aspirations for economic development and cooperative governance (Reeves, 2020, p.112). Reeves, therefore, calls upon Canada to drop the rhetorics of "free" and "open" towards an "inclusive" and "diverse" Indo-Pacific rationale, to move away from its strict adherence to regional visions of its American counterpart and adopt a normative alignment with adapter states' (e.g., ASEAN states) (Reeves, 2020, p.89). He suggests Canada follow the lead of Japan's IPS based on principles of openness, transparency, and progressiveness that Canada can learn from signaling "respect to primacy regional dynamics", its willingness to engage with actors on its own terms and to signal Canada's commitments to contribute to Asia's strategic stability, making Canada an attractive partner to the region, and therefore, the ability "to influence the evolution of Asia's regional order". (Reeves, 2023, p.122).

Nevertheless, a "more inclusive" Indo-Pacific evokes what Timothy Doyle and Dennis Rumley coins, the rendering of the Indo-Pacific as a "liquid continuum" of Western empires, reordered under the imaginaries of Western demands for "free and smooth movement through time and place", allowing "neo-colonial forces to move anywhere they wish" while disregarding formal boundaries of local polities and histories (Doyle & Dennis, 2019, p. 24). *The language of inclusivity serves as a veneer for masking unequal power relations and geopolitical dominance.* Li Han Song reminds us that the Indo-Pacific concept part of imperial lexicons—appropriated from Nazi Deputy Führer Karl Haushofer's ambitions for Germany's imperial expansion in the Far East. Haushofer's geopolitics was premised on accessing strategic travel spaces, such as oceans stretching from the West Pacific to the South Seas of the Indian Ocean, underlining how control of mobility and maritime routes became foundational to imperial power (Li, p. 823). Japan's IPS, lauded by Reeves (2020) for its inclusive principles (p. 48), is premised on the confluence of two seas and draws uncomfortable parallels to Haushofer's mapping ambitions for the region. Moon Chung-In aptly remarks on the irony of Japan's Indo-Pacific policy, which touts an "inclusivity, trust and reciprocity" policy introduced by Shinzo Abe, who drew much of his political great inspirations for restoring Japan's imperial past (Moon, 2023).

Under auspicious framings of a partnership based on inclusivity and mutual benefit, the Canada-ASEAN Free Trade Agreement is disproportionately driven by Canadian priorities and economic interests. A 2017 report by the Asia Pacific Foundation show disproportionate economic relations between Canada and ASEAN countries (except for with Indonesia and Singapore), with trading relations skewed in favor of Canada's exports and imports, while two-way trading relations are miniscule (APF, 2017). With the installment of the IPS, the Canada-ASEAN Free Trade Agreements continues to reinforce these imbalances through investments into Canadian prioritized industries (e.g energy, agriculture, clean technologies and the digital economy) – constraining ASEAN economies, which require

an estimated USD 210 billion annually to meet critical infrastructural needs (Medina, 2023) dependent on narrow investments that limits local capacities for diverse development and progress.

Feminist observers of the CIPS, Maryruth Belsey Priebe and Astha Chadha (2023, Part I) similarly advocate for a "progressive trade agenda", asserting that international trade remains inherently unequal and often fails to benefit everyone equitably, particularly women and girls. While approving of the Indo-Pacific Strategy's inclusion of the Feminist International Assistance Funds (FIAP), which channels an estimated CAD 1 billion annually into the region (GAC, 2024, p. 10), Priebe and Chadha calls out the IPS for downplaying the FIAP's defining purpose: to challenge entrenched social norms and power relations that perpetuate gender inequalities – urging the CIPS to engage deepen the Strategy's engagement with Canada's Feminist Foreign Policy (2023, Part II). global systematic inequalities. Yet, a more progressive or inclusive IPS grounded in Canada's feminist foreign policy brand does not go far in equitable global relations. As Laura Parisi notes Canada's FIAP assumes that "gender equality is a precondition for economic growth", where Canada can benefit from tapping into women-led economies (Parisi, 2020; p. 173). The development of women and often racialized communities are means to the ends for international trading. The installment of FIAP in the Indo-Pacific Strategy proves Parisi's point, as it frames the FIAP as "investments in people", to achieve an "outcome on women's empowerment and local economic growth" (GAC, 2024: p. 11). Beyond the objectification and dehumanization of women, particularly from the Global South, as tools for capital accumulation, women's empowerment, singled out as the solution to global inequalities, whitewashes Canada's participation in enforcing global inequalities. The extension of the FIAP to diverse communities in the Indo-Pacific allows the Strategy to claim that Canada's engagement with the Indo-Pacific is mutually beneficial while obscuring the unequal economic relations highlighted above, between the two regions.

Climate Change

And finally, the Canadian Indo-Pacific Strategy's commitment to supporting the Indo-Pacific in "fighting against climate change and biodiversity loss" (GAC, 2022, p. 3) is a new addition to its 2016 ASEAN-Canada Plan of Action for Enhanced Partnership predecessor. The Strategy emphasizes that the Indo-Pacific region, with its rapidly industrializing economies, emits the highest in the world, accounting for half of global carbon emissions. Through sharing clean technologies and expertise, the Strategy aims to ensure that the region can grow sustainable economies and adapt to climate change (GAC, 2022, p. 37).

The Strategy's climate plan for the Indo-Pacific involves three aspects – ocean management (based on Canada's coastal expertise), infrastructural support, and supporting biodiversity (GAC, 2022). Canada has since patrolled the region's seas in protection of fisheries and deployed surveillance technologies – the Joint Analytical Cell for collecting intelligence data for monitoring illegal, unregulated, and unreported (IUU) fishing activities (GAC, 2022). FinDev is estimated to have received 750 million from the Canadian government through Crown Corporation Export Development Canada – with the amount specifically financing and loaning projects that bolster "climate action, mitigation, and adaptation" underpinned by the FinDev's corporation's objectives for "sustainable economic growth and development" (FinDev, 2023; p. 18;8). Such projects, however, are not yet publicly disclosed. Independently, Canada is also supporting infrastructural financing of clean water and energy projects such as the Karian Serpong Water Supply Project (CAD 40 million) and the Sustainable Least Cost Electrification-1 Program in Indonesia (CAD64 million) (GAC, 2024, p. 12).

Considering the saturation of discussions surrounding economic and security areas within foreign policy and international relations,

scholarly scrutiny of the Canadian Indo-Pacific's climate response is scarce. Christina Pan and Parker Li (2024) warn that the differential contexts between ASEAN countries' climate needs compared to Canada—citing that Southeast Asian country's dependence on fossil fuels means that Canada's engagement in clean energy technologies and green futures may not reap measurable outcomes towards sustainable transitions (p.80). However, such a mismatch in the CIPS's understanding of the climate needs of the Indo-Pacific region raises concerns. This is because the Strategy reduces climate change to a phenomenon that can be fixed through Western technological and financial impositions while evading local knowledges that has long informed ways to sustain regional environments and biodiversity. As Farhana Sultana asserts, sustainability plans imposed by the Global North often pervade a "colonial gaze" on the Global South, enforcing Eurocentric knowledge and climate solutions, "cultivating epistemologies of deficiency", yet expecting local communities to adapt to the solutions (Sultana, 2022, p. 6). Indigenous knowledge on living and sustaining the local environment is devalued and sidelined, replaced by technofetishism and extractive interventions (Sultana, 2022, p. 6).

Indigenous and localized knowledge must be the cornerstone of foreign and international climate policies like the CIPS. The African Union's Sendai Framework explicitly calls for the centering of Indigenous traditional knowledges to complement scientific knowledges in responding to climate impacts. The AU's Programme of Action (PoA) for the Implementation of the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015–2030 brought together 15 indigenous advisory members to inform its strategies – relying on oral histories of indigenous communities to build the AU's regional climate policy direction rather than rush to adopt technologies that overlook local contexts (Bol & van Niekerk, 2024, p. 7). With the implementation of the Sendai Framework, the AU has since reaped successes in reducing mortality, economic and infrastructural losses regionally (Maydena, 2016, p. 47). Contrastingly, there is no mention within the CIPS to prioritize Indigenous knowledge in its climate response other

than through the lens of economic empowerment and development of Indigenous people. For a start, Canada can learn from such regional and international initiatives grounded in working with indigenous communities in the Indo-Pacific region – such as the Orang Laut and Orang Asli peoples in the Malayan Straits or the Urak Lawoi people in Thailand for building ocean and climate engagement solutions with the Indo-Pacific region.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the Canadian Indo-Pacific Strategy (CIPS) has ignited substantial scholarly and policy debates since its launch in 2022. This review examines discussions on focus areas of the CIPS such as engaging China, fostering economic partnerships, and addressing climate change, highlighting key tensions and limitations of mainstream scholarly response to the Strategy.

Canada's anti-China stance has provoked scholarly calls for examining nuanced realities of regional and global dynamics. While the Strategy frames China as a disruptive power that must be countered, scholarly critiques caution against the risks of oversimplification and the potential alienation of Southeast Asia, a region with complex ties to China. Instead, they advocate for policies rooted in multi-alignment that involves a mixed strategy of balance and hedging that supports Canada's broader engagement with China and the Indo-Pacific. However, the scholarship remains bound by assumptions rooted in a Westphalian worldview, limiting the potential for reimagining global relations with China to tendencies of militarized mobilizations. Postcolonial perspectives suggest that building more comprehensive relations with China needs to be grounded in interconnected peoples and histories, centering relations formed beyond state-to-state interactions.

Intertwined with the CIPS's saturated focus on managing China is the lack of an Indo-Pacific rationale that directs Canadian response in the Indo-Pacific region – other than its acceptance and alignment of a US-led Free and Open Indo-Pacific Framework. Jeffrey Reeves

advocated for a shift from “free and open” to “inclusive and diverse” as principles for grounding Canada’s Indo-Pacific rationale, emphasized on prioritizing that prioritize regional and local aspirations for Canada to integrate strategically with regional relations. Nevertheless, postcolonial engagement has since highlighted that more progressive policies of the CIPS, such as the Canada-ASEAN Free Trade Agreement and the Feminist International Assistance Policy (FIAP) in the CIPS, while commendable for its inclusive stance, reflect a superficial commitment to regional aspiration – perpetuating economic dependencies of the Global South and reinforces structural inequalities.

This policy review also notes that critical observers of the CIPS’s climate response should raise concerns about its lack of prioritization of consulting local communities in the Indo-Pacific. Suggesting that Canada can take lessons from successful regional initiatives led by indigenous communities, such as the African Union’s Sendai Framework to integrate traditional knowledge systems in its Indo-Pacific climate response.

Finally, it is not the aim of this review to propose specific policy recommendations – rather serving only as a preliminary critical analysis of the Strategy through a postcolonial lens centered on the need to foreground interconnected and relational histories, pluralistic ontologies, and knowledges of local communities as a start for more critical scholarly conversations and alternative knowledge productions, moving beyond current mainstream scholarly response for future conversations on Canada’s role in the Indo-Pacific.

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