

Canada and Asia—New Opportunities, New Challenges

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The attention of many Canadians has been focused recently on responses to the current international economic downturn, even as our news headlines are captivated by vexing questions about the (mis) behaviour of elected representatives and relations between the government and Parliament. In Asia too, the international economy is the cause for much local uncertainty even as domestic politics are the source of a range of difficult challenges. China's recently concluded National People's Congress addressed a range of complex questions ranging from fiscal stimulus to housing and health care. Japan's newly elected government of Yukio Hatoyama faces challenges around economic recovery and debt reduction, while political tensions on the Korean peninsula are on the rise. India faces continued questions about regional peace and security even as it struggles with domestic insurgency. Across Southeast Asia the quest for a return to economic prosperity combines with questions about regional integration and the rise of China. These and other pressing issues dominate the news and the policy agendas for economies across the Asia-Pacific region and have important implications globally.

Yet little is heard of these issues in the Canadian mainstream, which seems more focused on immediate domestic economic conditions and political debates. Nonetheless, our future as Canadians will be affected significantly by the outcome of political, economic and social developments in Asia. These are not simply 'local' matters of concern to Asia specialists, but should be part of a broader Canadian perspective on our future on the world. We need to pay more attention to these broader and long-term international issues, even as we are compelled to confront a range of more immediate local challenges. As an Asia-Pacific trading economy, Canada faces the integration of the global and the local in ways that require a more intensive national conversation on Asia.

Asia's importance to Canada is increasingly evident. Investment from China in particular in Canada's resource sector; continued patterns of migration and cultural exchanges; the need for expanded cooperation on global issues such as climate change and health, these and many other issues invite the attention of all Canadians. Changing conditions in Asia have significance not only for relations with Canada but for peace and stability in the region. Parallels to Central Europe 100 years ago in the wake of the decline of the Ottoman Empire are striking. We see in Asia the gradual withdrawal of US influence and the rise of China and

India as strategic competitors, even as a host of emerging economies -- whether the 'stans' of Central Asia or the economies of Southeast Asia -- seek a variety of commercial and strategic relationships that can increase their competitiveness locally and globally. Potential synergies and cooperation are promising, but the historical alternative of tension and conflict cannot be discounted.

Fortunately, regional and global institutions for trade and investment cooperation, the rule of law, and peace and security afford opportunities for managing the complexities of Asia much better than was the case in Central Europe a century ago. In the face of increased paralysis of the World Trade Organization's development round, regional trade and investment protection agreements and the emergence of networks on security cooperation can lay the groundwork for productive and peaceful development. While regional trade and investment agreements within Asia have tended disturbingly toward exclusion of outsiders, Canada still has the opportunity through the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) process; the Trans Pacific Partnership initiative, and a range of other Asia Pacific cooperation arrangements to ensure continued participation and relevance. However, in order to ensure that resources of time, attention and funding are committed to participation in these organizations and in the relationships which they foster, Canadians need a fundamental transformation in attitudes and behaviour about Asia.

To be sure, questions about Canada's "Asia strategy" continue to be debated in the halls of government, academia and civil society, even as we are presented with significant opportunities stemming from the Prime Minister's visit to Asia in December 2009 and the G8/G20 meetings this summer. A new era of engagement may be upon us and it is up to Canadians to begin the complex and difficult process of including Asia among our own priorities. Unfortunately, popular perceptions such as those revealed in the Asia-Pacific Foundation's polling data (<http://www.asiapacific.ca/surveys/national-opinion-polls/2010-national-opinion-poll-canadian-views-asia>) suggest that many Canadians still regard Asia as a distant and somewhat irrelevant -- or even threatening -- place. Business behaviour, generally and in response to the current financial crisis, has only hesitantly and partially begun to look seriously at Asia as a source of business growth and prosperity. Academic and civil society organizations continue to develop bilateral links with counterparts in Asia, although questions remain as to how these fit into a broader Canadian program of engagement. In short, we need a coordinated and consultative national strategy.

In contrast to the Canada-US Free Trade Agreement and NAFTA, Canada's emerging relations with Asia cannot be a product of government vision and initiative alone. We need a pan-Canada approach that involves participation and support from government at both the provincial and federal levels; academia and the policy community; and civil society and NGO groups. Each of these sectors can contribute in different ways to raising Canada's awareness and commitment to building stronger ties in Asia. Federal government initiatives can bring

significant policy weight and resources to bear to build policy consensus and to steer public activities and attention toward Asia. Developing stronger institutional and networking links between government, academia and civil society groups in Canada and counterparts in Asia would be well worth the investment and can help cement Canada's role to ensure our long-term participation in the region. A Canadian equivalent to the US Fulbright program, the British Council, or the German Goethe Foundation would be a welcome contribution and expression of Canada's commitment to promoting Canada's conditions to counterparts in Asia and publicizing Asia to Canadians. A national discussion on Canada's relations with a changing Asia would be invaluable, including all forms of media, town hall meetings, and various other efforts.

Provincial government efforts are also critical, as is the need to coordinate these with initiatives at the federal level. The BC government's Asia-Pacific Trade Council and the more recent suggestion for a national Asia-Pacific centre are useful examples of efforts to build cooperation and consultation across many sectors of Canadian society to expand linkages across Asia. These sorts of initiatives could usefully be deployed Canada-wide. Civil society organizations and NGOs can play an invaluable role in building a consensus across Canadian society around principled engagement with Asia that pays due attention to migration, cultural interchange, family and community linkages and human rights. The efforts by First Nations communities in British Columbia and Alberta to engage with commercial and social development challenges for ethnic minorities in Asia are particularly salient examples of the opportunities Canada can grasp in finding innovative and creative ways to build linkages with a changing Asia. Universities, think tanks and other organizations in the policy community can also do more to coordinate their activities and achievements in building and disseminating knowledge about Asia that is relevant for Canadians.

At the end of the day, Asia's importance to Canada and the world requires our attention. The price of engagement is real, but remains significantly less than the cost of the alternative. A pan-Canada approach to reinvigorating a Canadian Asia strategy would be an essential task. Canada's engagement with Asia requires something of a 'full court press' that engages and mobilizes all the diverse elements of Canadian society. There is little time to lose as the potential returns on such an investment are considerable while the costs of inaction are significant. A national conversation on Canada's relations with Asia must start soon.