

Ryan Touhey & Yuen Pau Woo

# Canada and Asia

## *Introduction*

This year marks the 25th anniversary of the Canadian legislation that led to the creation of the Asia Pacific Foundation of Canada (APFC). As the country's leading think tank on Canada-Asia relations, the foundation has put together a special issue of *International Journal*. This collection consists of 10 articles on various aspects of the Canada-Asia relationship, as well as an interview with four distinguished practitioners of international policy—Senator Jack Austin, Donald Campbell, former prime minister Joe Clark, and Wendy Dobson. Fittingly, the collection also includes a piece on the years leading up to the creation of the APFC in 1984, prepared by Greg Donaghy of the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade's historical section. In commissioning the articles, the editors asked the authors to not only review the last quarter century of relations with Asia, but also to assess the prospects for stronger relations in the years ahead.

There have been many important developments in Canada-Asia economic and political relations over the past 25 years. These include rising

*Ryan Touhey is assistant professor of history at St. Jerome's University/University of Waterloo. Yuen Pau Woo is president and CEO of the Asia Pacific Foundation of Canada.*

two-way trade volumes, major Japanese automotive investments in Canada's manufacturing heartland, Ottawa's response to the Chinese government's suppression of protesters at Tiananmen Square in 1989, the Team Canada trade missions that traversed the region throughout the 1990s, Canada's hosting of a controversial APEC summit in 1997 (dubbed "Canada's year of Asia Pacific"), and the chill in political relations with New Delhi following the testing of nuclear weapons in 1998. In terms of people-to-people ties, immigration from Asia to Canada has soared in the last quarter century, with India and China now accounting for the two largest sources of immigration to Canada. In the education field, Canada has already established itself as a destination for training in English as a second language, but, more recently, K-12 public schools, universities, polytechnics, and colleges have become more aggressive in recruiting students from Asia. A number of post-secondary institutions have also begun to explore student-faculty exchanges, joint degrees, and research partnerships with counterparts in the region.

The size and scope of contacts between Canada and Asia have increased manifold since the early 1980s. The Canada-Asia relationship today is no longer led or dominated by government policy. There is a multiplicity of Canadian interests across the Pacific, including those of the private sector, civil society organizations, think tanks, and above all the many individuals with kinship ties and personal networks throughout Asia. Understanding contemporary Canada-Asia relations, therefore, amounts to much more than an understanding of Canadian foreign policy towards Asia. The Canadian government nonetheless sets a tone in relations with Asian countries and its actions can facilitate or deter private initiatives. In a number of areas, such as trade and investment policy, immigration and visas, and development assistance, the government has the sole authority to regulate trans-Pacific flows. This collection of essays looks at both governmental and nongovernmental dimensions of the Canada-Asia relationship, with special emphasis on the policy interventions that are needed to strengthen relations with Asia.

Twenty-five years ago, not many would have guessed at the importance that Asia plays in the world today. Indeed, Asia's rise and what that means for Canadians is often overlooked by scholars of Canadian foreign policy.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Brian Bow and Patrick Lennox, eds., *An Independent Foreign Policy for Canada? Challenge and Choices for the Future* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008), which ignores Canada's ties to the Asia Pacific region.

While Asia is not immune to the current global recession, Asian economies were generally in better shape than industrialized countries entering the downturn and should therefore be in better shape coming out of it. If anything, the current economic crisis will accelerate the shift in global influence towards emerging powers such as China and India.

The release of this special volume in late 2009 has a resonance, therefore, that goes well beyond the 25th anniversary of the APFC. The articles are a timely reflection on the state of Canada's relationship with a region that is already leading the world in economic growth, and which will play an increasingly important role in addressing global challenges such as climate change, international terrorism, and financial architecture. Canadians understand that a major global shift is taking place but it is not clear whether they are ready to incorporate the Asia Pacific region into their mental maps. In a 2008 national opinion poll conducted by APFC, a majority of Canadians agreed with the statement that the global influence of China and India will rival that of the United States within a decade. Yet when asked if Canada was part of the Asia-Pacific region, nearly 70 percent of respondents answered in the negative. If Ottawa has failed to articulate a clear vision of stronger relations with Asia, it may well be on account of a political and bureaucratic leadership class that shares the ambivalence of many Canadians about an Asia-Pacific future. As our distinguished interview panel suggests, the need for domestic leadership in building stronger relations with Asia is more important than ever.

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