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To Build Credible and Sustained Canada–Southeast Asia Partnerships

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As Canada expands its engagement with Southeast Asia under the Indo-Pacific Strategy, attention is turning to how it can translate its growing regional presence into meaningful and sustained partnerships. Recent diplomatic, economic, and security initiatives have raised Canada's regional profile, but questions remain about how it can build long-term relevance in an increasingly complex strategic environment. There is also growing recognition that the success of Canada's Indo-Pacific Strategy will depend on how Southeast Asia partners perceive its long-term commitment, credibility, and regional relevance.

To explore these issues, the Asia Pacific Foundation of Canada convened the Canada–Southeast Asia Strategic Roundtable on the sidelines of the 2026 Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore in May 2026. The senior policymakers, researchers, and practitioners who participated from Canada and across Southeast Asia – specifically, Singapore, the Philippines, and Malaysia – examined regional perceptions of Canada's engagement, evolving geopolitical dynamics, and practical opportunities to deepen co-operation.

How the Region is Viewing Canadian Engagement

While Canada is generally considered to be a constructive and welcome partner in Southeast Asia, there is also an appreciation that it faces competing strategic priorities across North America, Europe, and the Arctic, leaving it with less capacity for engaging Southeast Asia. Canada enjoys positive relationships with ASEAN member states, contributes actively to ASEAN-led institutions, and faces relatively little political resistance compared with many larger powers. However, while these qualities provide a favourable foundation on which Canada can deepen regional engagement, this goodwill should not be taken for granted.

Like other middle powers, Canada has finite resources, making it necessary to prioritize areas to which it can make meaningful long-term contributions. These could include defence co-operation, cybersecurity and artificial intelligence, energy and natural resources, educational exchanges, research partnerships, and people-to-people connections. The discussion suggested that, rather than seeking to match the scale of engagement undertaken by larger powers, Canada's comparative advantage lies in making sustained contributions in carefully selected areas where it has recognized expertise and can maintain long-term commitments.



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Drawing on the [2026 State of Southeast Asia Survey](#) published by Singapore's ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute, one participant observed that Southeast Asian assessments of external partners tend to be highly pragmatic. Besides diplomatic presence, relevance also depends on whether a partner delivers tangible economic and security benefits. The participant characterized Canada as a partner of comparatively limited strategic relevance, alongside New Zealand and Russia, but argued that it could improve its standing by making contributions of greater material consequence to the region. These contributions could take the form of financial commitments and deeper trade and investment ties, as well as capacity-building, training, equipment and sustained participation in regional defence activities.

Southeast Asia is neither strategically nor politically homogeneous and individual states assess Canadian initiatives through the lens of their own strategic priorities, domestic political considerations, and diplomatic traditions. The discussion emphasized, for example, that alliance-centric thinking has limited resonance in many parts of Southeast Asia. Ottawa should adapt based on where its comparative strengths are most valued and where partnerships can deliver the most impact.

Navigating a Fragmenting Southeast Asia

Canada is engaging a Southeast Asia that is becoming more complex and fragmented. While intensifying geopolitical competition and global economic uncertainty have contributed to this environment, fragmentation is also driven by developments within the region itself. Domestic political transitions, competing national priorities, differing threat perceptions, and varying approaches to major power competition help explain why Southeast Asia cannot be viewed as a single strategic actor. Many Southeast Asian governments, particularly several ASEAN anchor states – Malaysia, Indonesia, the Philippines, and Thailand – are preoccupied with domestic political changes, leaving them less bandwidth for regional leadership and collective action.

In terms of regional architecture, ASEAN remains the primary multilateral institution through which many regional issues are managed. While its structural constraints do not necessarily diminish its central role, it is important to recognize both ASEAN's value and its limitations. Its failure to reach consensus on energy co-operation at its 2025 summit is a recent example of these constraints. The Philippines' conclusion of multiple defence access agreements with external partners similarly illustrates how member states increasingly pursue complementary bilateral arrangements when ASEAN alone cannot fully address pressing security challenges.

Participants suggested that, while ASEAN remains central to the regional architecture, its consensus-based processes do not always provide sufficient flexibility or timeliness in responding to emerging regional challenges. Ambitious regional initiatives may therefore be better advanced through complementary bilateral, plurilateral, and minilateral channels. Canada should maintain its engagement with ASEAN while simultaneously pursuing practical co-operative arrangements through these other types of channels.

Building Credible and Sustained Partnerships

The discussion repeatedly emphasized that sustained, rather than episodic, engagement is essential for building trust, preserving expertise, and strengthening Canada's long-term credibility in the region. While Canada's Indo-Pacific Strategy has expanded the country's regional profile through increased diplomatic, security, and economic engagement, visibility alone is insufficient. Middle powers cannot build credibility simply by increasing activity or announcing new initiatives. Rather, credibility develops through regular dialogue and relationships that deepen over time and outlast political cycles. For Canada, this means building ties beyond formal diplomatic channels and diaspora communities through educational exchanges, scholarships, and people-to-people ties.

It is also important to engage Southeast Asia's wider policy ecosystem beyond formal government channels. Universities, think tanks, policy institutes, Track 1.5 and Track 2 dialogues, and professional networks are all valuable platforms for sustaining policy dialogue, building trust, and deepening regional expertise. One recommendation was for Canada to treat Southeast Asian institutes as knowledge partners instead of simply recipients of Canadian expertise. In practice, this means involving them from the outset in identifying research questions, designing initiatives, and producing policy analysis. These institutions possess deep contextual expertise and local networks that can sharpen Canadian perspectives. Engaging regional partners as equal collaborators is needed to strengthen Canada's understanding of regional priorities and enhance the quality of its future policy co-operation.

Participants also encouraged greater engagement with the private sector, as stronger business-to-business linkages can complement government and policy dialogues and broaden the base of Canada-Southeast Asia partnerships, particularly in emerging sectors such as cybersecurity and artificial intelligence. For Canada, the challenge is not identifying new areas for co-operation but turning promising initiatives into relationships with sufficient depth and momentum.



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