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Revitalizing Canada-Southeast Asia Relations: The TAC gives us a ticket ... but do we have a destination?

By Brian Job

Canada's relevance to Southeast Asia has waned while major powers like the US and China are actively courting the region and staking their ground in the next generation of regional institutions. However, change may be coming with Canada's recent signing of ASEAN's Treaty of Amity and Cooperation. Does the treaty signal meaningful policy change by Ottawa or is it simply a rhetorical gesture?

On July 24 Canada acceded to the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC), joining with the 10 member states of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and 18 others outside the region in affirming their commitments to regional peace and stability and involvement in ASEAN regional processes. The event went largely unnoticed in Canada.¹ The Department of Foreign Affairs mentioned it only in a July 23, omnibus news release, "Minister Cannon participates in ASEAN meetings".² This lack of attention demonstrates how Southeast Asia has slipped off the map of Canadian foreign policy over the last decade. In Jakarta, Kuala Lumpur, Bangkok, Singapore and other regional capitals, Canada no longer appears on radar screens as an attentive and relevant participant in regional affairs.

Change may be in the air. Canada, in Foreign Affairs Minister Cannon's words, signed the TAC "as a demonstration

of Canada's engagement in Southeast Asia." Mr. Cannon invoked Canada's commitment to the "promotion and protection of Canadian values of freedom, democracy, human rights and the rule of law" and cited Canada and ASEAN's "mutual respect and a shared commitment to fundamental freedoms and democratic governance."³

The question is whether accession to the treaty signals meaningful policy change by Ottawa or is simply a rhetorical gesture designed to fend off critics at home and assuage governments abroad? Addressing our interests, promoting Canadian values and re-gaining a presence in Southeast Asia and the broader Asia Pacific cannot be accomplished with minimalist commitments and episodic attention. Recent steps by Ottawa raise expectations but specific steps (along lines set out later) are required to translate rhetoric to action.



About The Author

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Canada, Southeast Asia and ASEAN... a languishing legacy

The TAC is replete with references to promotion of “perpetual peace,” “mutual respect for independence, sovereignty, equality,” non-interference, and peaceful settlement of disputes.⁴ But dismissing it on this basis as an anachronism and for its lack of substance is misguided. For ASEAN’s members the TAC is a litmus test; for its signatories, the TAC is a “ticket” for engagement in the expanding network of ASEAN-centred regional institutions.



Minister Cannon at the signing ceremony of the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation, Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade, July 23, 2010

Canada is a decided latecomer in gaining this ticket. We are the last of ASEAN’s Dialogue Partner states and the last member of the region-wide ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) to join.⁵ Since opening the treaty to non-Southeast Asian states in 2003, some 29 states in the region and beyond have signed. China and India were the first to join; the United States signed in 2009.

Canada’s foot dragging on the TAC typifies Ottawa’s attention to Southeast Asia over the past decade—a sharp contrast to our historically proactive regional involvement since the 1950s. Initially through the Colombo Plan, later Commonwealth relationships, and then CIDA and the IDRC, Canada was an active bilateral and regional participant.⁶ CIDA and the IDRC funding supported a wide range of programming, including economic development programs, academic linkages, student scholarships, gender entitlement initiatives and official and unofficial institution building. Innovative programs that advanced cooperative security and human security, such as the Southeast Asia Cooperation Program, were in tune with regional foreign ministries and think tanks as they grappled with the new realities of the

post-Cold War.⁷ With consistent funding through the 1980s and 1990s, Canadian development overall contributions toward Southeast Asia totaled over \$2.5 billion. Today, however, Southeast Asia is not a high priority. Canadian aid is at much reduced levels, largely channeled in the areas of health (HIV/AIDS and infectious disease), economics (e.g. training in WTO procedures), and gender equality.

Figure 1: Timeline of Canada-ASEAN Relationship

Date	Event
1967	ASEAN established - Original five members include Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore and Thailand
1976	TAC negotiated and signed
1977	Canada provides development assistance to regional ASEAN projects Canada becomes a Dialogue Partner of ASEAN
1981	ASEAN-Canada Economic Cooperation Agreement Signed
1987	TAC amended to allow accession of non-ASEAN states
1989	Creation of the Canada-ASEAN Centre
1993	ASEAN-Canada Economic Cooperation Revised Agreement Signed
1994	ARF Inaugural meeting
1999	ASEAN membership reaches ten
2003	China and India sign TAC, join Papua New Guinea (1989) as the second and third non-SEA states to sign
2005-2007	ASEAN-Canada Joint Cooperation Work Plan (JCWP) 2007-2010 follow-up on JCWP
2007	Canada imposes targeted sanctions on Burma
2008	ASEAN Charter promulgated
2009	Canada appoints first Ambassador to ASEAN
2009	US accedes to the TAC
2010	Canada accedes to the TAC
2010	Plan of Action for ASEAN-Canada Enhanced Partnership (2010-2015) Outlined

The programmatic relationships of prior decades were sanctioned and advanced through official and political attention in Ottawa.⁸ In the early 1990s, Canadian governments came to realize that the road to fostering the post-Cold War regional stability needed for sustained economic growth was through Asia Pacific institution building. Accordingly, Canada became an early Dialogue Partner of ASEAN and was an enthusiastic member of the ASEAN Regional Forum (as well as of APEC). To extend the oft-repeated slogan, “ASEAN was in the driver’s seat ... Canada helped to design and maintain the vehicle.” Canadian officials and academics worked together to facilitate Track 2 regional dialogues on human rights and regional security. Canada was a charter member of the Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia Pacific (CSCAP)—the expert network supporting the ARF.⁹ From 1989-2001, a series of CIDA-sponsored expert workshops served an important role as a neutral venue to bring together the parties with competing claims in the South China Sea.¹⁰

Canada has enjoyed and benefited from consistently positive people-to-people ties with Southeast Asia. Immigration has resulted in roughly 800,000 people settling here, just under half from the Philippines. Refugees from Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam have been welcomed. Student populations from Southeast Asia were once at levels that rivaled their counterpart numbers in the United States.¹¹ Moving in the other direction, Canadians have flocked to Southeast Asian destinations as tourists, their numbers now approaching half a million a year.



Philippines, ASEAN Vietnam 2010

Canada's official relations with, and presence in, Southeast Asia have declined since the late 1990s. Deep financial cuts to federal spending by the Liberal and then the Conservative government have taken their toll on programs and institutional support. Canada's participation in Track 2 activities, other than on an ad hoc and individual basis, has largely ended. Ottawa's attention, when it has turned to Asia, (i.e., beyond Afghanistan) has been fixated on China, to a lesser extent Japan, and most recently India. As a recent survey of Canadian-Southeast Asian relations concluded, "Canada ... lacked a consistent and sustained policy" toward Southeast Asia and has failed to regain focus toward a region that once again demands attention in light of our economic, social, and political interests.¹²

Reconnection and revitalization?

There may be, however, indications of change. Joining the TAC is one of a series of steps Ottawa has taken during the past two years regarding Southeast Asia. The trade and commercial potential of the region has caught the government's attention in the post-2008 financial crisis international economy. Officials cite the region's market base (620 million population, US\$1.5 trillion GDP) with its rising middle class consumers, the healthy economic growth of

Southeast Asian countries (an ADB projected growth rate of 6.7% this year), and the increase in bilateral trade with Canada of some 20% between 2005 and 2009. With the intent of increasing both its "commercial and political presence," at the 2009 APEC meetings, Ministers Cannon and then-International Trade Minister Stockwell Day announced the creation of the Canada-ASEAN Network—an initiative aimed to coordinate linkages among Canadian missions in Southeast Asia.

As second step in 2009, Canada, along with many other states, appointed an Ambassador to ASEAN. This was necessitated by ASEAN promulgating its Charter in 2008, thus transforming it into a separate international entity that could enter into negotiation and agreements with other states.¹³

At the same ASEAN Post Ministerial Conference meetings last month that saw the TAC signing, came an announcement of adoption of a Plan of Action to implement the ASEAN-Canada Enhanced Partnership (2010-2015).¹⁴ This document highlights the complementarity of Canadian-Southeast Asian political, security, economic and social interests. It sets out an agenda, which if acted upon would yield practical results. This is, however, an important "if", because without additional finances and personnel commitments, including to the ASEAN Network, as well as to the plan's intended educational exchanges, and workshops, seminars, dialogues concerning human rights, judicial systems, good governance, engagement of civil society, democracy, human rights, trade and business, environmental sustainability, combating transnational crime and new technologies cannot be accomplished.¹⁵



Vietnam, ASEAN Vietnam 2010

Concerning "Human Rights, Good Governance, Democracy and Rule of Law"—the Canadian values agenda cited by government officials—the plan is quite brief (section 1.3)

noting “collaborating with ASEAN on human rights through regional dialogues,” “exchanges of best practices” and “capacity building initiatives,” including through the ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights (AICHR). However, while civil society is referred to in general terms, there is no mention of NGOs either generally or specifically, nor is there any reference to the Track 2 networks and dialogue processes that parallel and support official (Track 1) agendas.¹⁶

Taken at face value, this plan and other announcements point to an effort to revitalize the Canadian-Southeast Asian relationship. Yet for the moment there is little evidence of follow-up on the rhetoric of these announcements and appointments. Language concerning democracy and human rights on the one hand, coupled with anticipation of increased economic benefits resonates with domestic and political audiences at home and abroad. However, it is unclear if Ottawa is prepared to implement programs that involve longer-term financial and human resource commitments designed with sufficient nuance to gain support from Southeast Asian governments, think-tanks, NGOs and civil society players. Based on the previous track record and announced government intentions to cut budgets further, there is room for considerable skepticism.

Assuming that our commitments extend beyond aspiration, then more critically, how does the rhetoric of Canadian priorities accord with the realities of Southeast Asia? A brief look at the challenges involved in advancing Canada’s economic interests and human rights values highlights these concerns.

Regarding trade and investment: As noted above, Canada’s trade volumes with ASEAN states have been increasing—the 2008 financial crisis having had little impact. A closer look, however, points to the uphill battle involved in achieving significant change in our trade and investment relationship. Canada continues to run a trade deficit with Southeast Asia (Canada’s imports are double its exports, \$8.86 billion vs \$4.19 billion in 2009). Our share of regional trade remains at less than 2.0%. Service exports to ASEAN countries are increasing but growing modestly; Canadian direct investment to ASEAN states has fallen since 1997 in real dollar terms. Altering these patterns will be hard to accomplish. Motivating Canadian business to take on the tough, longer-term challenges of Asian markets has proved notoriously difficult.



Malaysia, ASEAN Vietnam 2010

Southeast Asia’s booming overall trade is increasingly facilitated through the channels of free trade agreements, notably through the ASEAN-China FTA. Australia/New Zealand, India, and South Korea already operate within FTAs and the US and ASEAN have laid the groundwork for negotiating an agreement. Canada, on the other hand, is a significant laggard in this regard, with no FTA arrangements with any Asian country and a record of frustrated attempts to date. Negotiations with Singapore (since 2001) and with Korea (since 2005) have failed to yield any agreement; discussions began with India in 2009.

Regarding promotion of human rights and democracy: Significant challenges loom. Ottawa has become fixated on Burma. Canada’s condemnation of the deplorable human rights and human security situation in Burma/Myanmar is long-standing. Ottawa has supported all international efforts to criticize and sanction its military regime, imposing, in its own words, the “toughest [unilateral] sanctions of any country”.¹⁷ Sadly, the line-in-the-sand policies of Ottawa, the US and most other Western countries have achieved little. The Burmese regime, bolstered by its relationships with India and China, remains entrenched. ASEAN’s policy of “constructive engagement” of Burma continues to be an embarrassment; its members limiting themselves to frustrated vocal criticism of their recalcitrant colleague.¹⁸

Democracy’s trials in Southeast Asia are not limited to Burma. Thailand persists with what many of its citizens regard

as an unrepresentative governments following a military coup in 2006. With a deadlocked political process, further civil violence is feared.¹⁹ Groups such as Human Rights Watch and the International Crisis Group point to the violations of human rights in minority populations in several Southeast Asian states. Thus, there is ample scope for Canada's values promotion agenda—the challenge for Ottawa is to advance programs attuned to these distinctive regional contexts. One possible institutional avenue for doing so is through the recently established ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights (AICHR) -- the first intergovernmental human rights institution in Asia. As has been acknowledged by Ottawa, working to bolster the capacity of this fledgling institution could be an effective route to advance both Canadian and Southeast Asian interests.²⁰

Keeping a Seat at the Table ... “Half of diplomacy is showing up”

For Canada to regain a role in regional affairs, a sea change is required. Canada's absence from the scene over the past decade has meant that it is in danger of being shut out of the next generation of Asia Pacific regional institutions, in effect not being at the tables of the region that has become the centre of gravity of the global system. In part, this situation has come about by our not “showing up.” While the Prime Minister has attended the annual APEC Leaders' Meetings, and there have been ad hoc ministerial visits to the region, Canada has been a passive participant in regional institutions. Delegations tend to arrive with limited policy direction from Ottawa and very thin files for commitment. A telling example is Canada's apparent indifference regarding the Shangri-la Dialogue—only once in nine years has the Canadian Minister of Defence joined his counterparts in what has become the region's most prominent track 1.5 security forum.

Inattention has been reinforced by an attitude in Ottawa that only bilateral relationships, especially economic ones, count. Multilateral institutions are viewed with skepticism as redolent of outdated liberal thinking -- inefficient and ineffective. Admittedly, this criticism does resonate in the Asia Pacific context. The ARF, for instance, has shown little enthusiasm to address traditional regional security issues or intrastate conflicts. On the economic side, APEC is increasingly regarded as having run its course with FTAs becoming the economic instrument of choice. The dilemma for Canada is that our only seats at the table in the Asia Pacific are at these two static, if not declining, institutions.

US Secretary of State Hilary Clinton's comment about “showing up” is therefore germane. It highlights the real-

ization of the current US administration (in contrast to its predecessor) that regional dynamics are changing, that momentum is building toward a new regional architecture, and that in order to have a voice in shaping this architecture, being an engaged participant comes first. Washington now understands that even it cannot take its role for granted in the Asia Pacific environment of emerging regional powers. Ottawa certainly must take notice and act accordingly.



Ministerial Group Photo at the 17th ASEAN Regional Forum in Hanoi, ASEAN Vietnam, July 23, 2010

It is here that TAC membership constitutes a “ticket” for Canada. Our accession to the treaty fulfills the last of the three minimum conditions for invitation to the East Asia Summit (EAS), the institution that many observers see becoming Asia Pacific's key economic and political dialogue mechanism.²¹ Established in 2005 as an extension of the ASEAN Plus Three (ASEAN states plus China, South Korea and Japan), the EAS, now including Australia, New Zealand and India, has 16 members and significantly, based on the recent meeting in Hanoi, is about to invite Russia and the US to join. Both have indicated the likelihood of accepting. While the practical accomplishments of the EAS remain to be determined, it is likely the table around which the parameters of regional economic and political architectures will be determined. US analysts, in particular, envisage the prospect of the EAS annual summit meeting eclipsing the APEC leaders' forum.²² At this moment, it is highly problematic as to whether or not Canada is invited to join the EAS. Indeed, without Canada ever being mentioned, senior officials such as Singapore's foreign minister are already looking to limit EAS membership to what are seen as all the relevant players.²³

Equally uncertain is Canada's being seated at the table of two other potentially important regional institutions. One concerns security, the ADMM+8 -- the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting plus China, South Korea, Japan, Australia,

New Zealand, India, Russia and the US. Canada has never been mentioned as a participant—its record at the Shangri-la Dialogue very probably being taken as a signal of disinterest.

Second is the Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP), a coalition of Asia Pacific states looking toward establishing a broader free trade area. Spearheaded by the rather unlikely initial subset of New Zealand, Chile, Singapore and Brunei, the TPP has gained momentum with Australia, Peru, Vietnam, and most significantly, the United States is now looking to join. With a growing sense of the obsolescence of APEC, the TPP is seen as a regional successor within the Asia Pacific economy. In this instance, Canada was invited as an initial participant but declined to take up the offer, presumably because of its protectionist stance on agricultural supply management. Subsequently, upon noting Washington's overtures to negotiate entry, Ottawa's apparent renewed interest has been rebuffed, its presumed insistence on pre-conditions seen as a non-starter.²⁴

In sum, signing the TAC is a small, positive step toward Canada's renewed Asia Pacific engagement. Building upon this and sustaining momentum will require at minimum: articulation of a proactive foreign policy toward Asia, commitment of additional resources and personnel, reengagement of civil society groups, and taking advantage of opportunities where Canada's expertise and reputation can be leveraged effectively, including concerning human rights (e.g. the AICHR), and positive participation in multilateral security institutions (e.g. the ARF, the Shangri-la Dialogue) and economic institutions (e.g. looking to join the EAS).

We are latecomers; it would be disastrous to leave early again. Already viewed by regional players as disinterested and minimally committed, if we find ourselves relegated to observer status in the next generation of Asia Pacific institutions, the promotion of Canadian interests and values will have little, if any, chance of success.

¹ A search indicates that besides the Asia Pacific Foundation's referral to DFAIT's announcement, per footnote following, other Canadian coverage was provided only in the *Calgary Herald*, on July 26, 2010, "Canada 'Pleased' to sign ASEAN Pact" <http://www.calgaryherald.com/news/Canada+pleased+sign+ASEAN+pact/3322262/story.html> and in the on-line magazine, Embassy Magazine, on July 28, 2010, in Leah Sarson's, "Use human rights to reach out to ASEAN," available at www.embassymag.ca/page/view/asean-07-28-2010.

² See "Minister Cannon participates in ASEAN meetings." Available at http://www.international.gc.ca/ministers-ministres/cannon_asean-anase_2010.aspx?lang=eng.

³ "Opening Remarks by Minister Cannon at ASEAN-Canada Ministerial Meeting," available at <http://www.international.gc.ca/media/aff/speeches-discours/2010/2010-049.aspx?lang=eng>.

⁴ See <http://www.aseansec.org/TAC-KnowledgeKit.pdf>.

⁵ ASEAN Dialogue Partners are states that join in bilateral (ASEAN+1) and multilateral meetings with ASEAN, thus are states with regularized social, economic and political interests in Southeast Asia. Canada became a Dialogue Partner state in 1977, one of the first to do so. The ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), established in 1994, is an Asia Pacific-wide institution with a mandate to foster dialogue, confidence building, and preventive diplomacy on security matters. Canada was a founding member.

⁶ For a review of Canadian engagement in Southeast Asia see Richard Stubbs and Mark S. Williams, 2009. "The poor cousin? Canada-ASEAN relations." *International Journal*, 64, 4, 927-939.

⁷ See Paul Evans, 2009. "Canada and Asia Pacific's track-two diplomacy." *International Journal*, 64, 4, 1027-1038.

⁸ A first ASEAN-Canada Economic Cooperation Agreement was agreed to in 1982 and subsequently renewed. See Figure 1 for a time line of Canada-Southeast Asian relevant events.

⁹ See www.cscap.org, noting for instance Canada's responsibility for the annual CSCAP Regional Security Outlook.

¹⁰ For an overview of the project, see Djalal, H. and I. Townsend-Gault (1999). *Managing Potential Conflicts in the South China Sea. Herding Cats*. C. Crocker and F. Hampson, et al. Washington DC, USIP Press: 109-133.

¹¹ Stubbs and Williams, op. cit., page 930, point out that in the 1980s there were over 6,000 Malaysian students studying in Canada, outnumbering those from the US. Overall numbers of students from ASEAN countries in recent years have been around 3,500. The decline is variously due to the increased costs of Canadian tuition, the lack of scholarship funding, and targeted, energetic recruitment by Australia, the U.S., and the U.K.

¹² Stubbs and Williams, op. cit. page 931

¹³ See www.aseansec.org/publications/ASEAN-Charter.pdf. Canada's Ambassador to Indonesia serves as the (co-accredited) Ambassador to ASEAN, whose Secretariat is in Jakarta.

¹⁴ DFAIT news release, "Minister Cannon Concludes ...," op. cit. Text of the "Plan of Action to Implement the Joint Declaration on ASEAN-Canada Enhanced Partnership" [sic] was made available to the author by DFAIT. Sections quoted are cited by the paragraph numbers in the text.

¹⁵ Notably, but perhaps not surprisingly, the only mention in the plan of a specific technology is of Carbon Capture and Storage technology and its applications. See Para 3.7.2.

¹⁶ Particular note is taken (Section 1.5) of interfaith dialogue in general terms referring to the "participation of civil society, religious groups, academia, and youth," but without mention of any specific programs.

¹⁷ The quoted phrase is from "Canada responds to release of election date from Burma," www.international.gc.ca/media/aff/news-communications/2010/257.aspx. Burma's admittance to membership in 1997 significantly complicated Canada-ASEAN relations, leading to the suspension of the annual Canada-ASEAN Dialogue Partner meetings for over five years.

¹⁸ See Kavi Chongkittavorn, "Is Asean biting off more than it can chew?" *The Nation*, April 5, 2010; available at www.nationmultimedia.com/home/2010/04/05/opinion/ls-Asean-biting-off-more-than-it-can-chew-30126370.html.

¹⁹ See Aim Sinpeng, Thailand: Battle of the Colours, in *Canada Asia Agenda* Issue 10, <http://www.asiapacific.ca/canada-asia-agenda/thailand-battle-colours>.

²⁰ For a forceful presentation of views concerning Canada and ASEAN on human rights issues, see Leah Sarson, "Use human rights to reach out to ASEAN," *Embassy*, July 28, 2010. Available at <http://www.embassymag.ca/page/view/asean-07-28-2010>.

²¹ The other two requirements for EAS inclusion are being an ASEAN Dialogue Partner and being seen as an engaged state in regional affairs.

²² See Ernest Z. Bower, "A New Paradigm for APEC?" CSIS Southeast Asia Program, Washington D.C.; available at <http://csis.org/publication/new-paradigm-apec>.

²³ See the transcript of Minister of Foreign Affairs George Yeo remarks after the ASEAN Ministerial Meeting, 20 July, 2010, Hanoi; available at http://app.mfa.gov.sg/2006/lowRes/press/view_press.asp?post_id=6208.

²⁴ See John Ibbitson, "Canada risks being shut out of Pacific trade pact, New Zealand PM warns," *The Globe and Mail*, April 15, 2010; available at <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/politics/canada-risks-being-shut-out-of-pacific-trade-pact-new-zealand-pm-warns/article1535067/>

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