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# PLENARY SESSION SUMMARY REPORTS



The annual Canada-in-Asia Conference (CIAC) is a multi-directional engagement platform for Canada-based and Asia-based companies, institutions, universities, and governments. CIAC convenes business leaders, experts, investors, policy-makers, researchers, and innovators from across Asia and Canada to exchange perspectives, knowledge, and ideas, with the goal of facilitating collaborative partnerships. The conference's plenary and concurrent sessions, as well as dedicated networking times, provide a range of opportunities for engagement and exchange with likeminded partners.

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## PLENARY 1

The Global Competition  
for Talent

## PLENARY 2

Canadian Investment in  
Research for Development  
in Asia

## PLENARY 3

Canada-Asia Co-operation  
in Space

## PLENARY 4

Navigating Geopolitical Risk,  
Recasting Global Supply Chains

## PLENARY 5

Asia's Sustainable  
Infrastructure Opportunity

# The Global Competition for Talent



From left: Stephen Toope, President & CEO, Canadian Institute for Advanced Research (CIFAR) (moderator); Peter Stoicheff, President & Vice Chancellor, University of Saskatchewan; Lisa de Wilde, Bell Media Professor of Media Management, Schulich School of Business, York University, and Vice-Chair of the Board, Asia Pacific Foundation of Canada; Casey Lau, Executive Vice President, Asia Pacific, Web Summit; Kok Ping Soon, CEO, Singapore Business Federation.

## Executive Summary

The Canada-in-Asia Conference 2025 plenary session, “The Global Competition for Talent,” tackled the complex and urgent question of how countries can remain competitive in a tightening global talent landscape. Panellists from academia, tech, government, and business – from both Canada and Asia – offered reflections and forward-looking solutions on how to attract, retain, and develop talent amidst rising geopolitical tensions, the global trend toward authoritarianism, shifting immigration policies, and the accelerating demands of innovation-driven economies.

A central theme emerged for Canada: policies to promote effective talent pipelines need to evolve quickly. Canadian leaders voiced concern over the erosion of public support for immigration and the adverse effects of recent caps on international student visas, warning that these measures risk damaging Canada’s world-class higher education system and economic competitiveness. In contrast, Singapore’s efforts to ensure it attracts and retains

“We’re going to have to shift from [immigration priorities based on] recruitment to reciprocal engagement; Canada is going to have to support and develop talent in Asia through strategic partnerships, not only treating the region as a talent pool to draw from.”

– Stephen Toope,  
President & CEO, Canadian  
Institute for Advanced  
Research (CIFAR)

international talent at the top-, mid-, and lower levels incorporate a focus on local workforce resilience through its SkillsFuture initiative, which upskills and reskills mature workers and embraces lifelong learning.

Corporate examples, like TELUS's global cultural integration playbook, emphasized the role of purpose-driven values in attracting talent, while Web Summit's Casey Lau remarked on the importance of place-based innovation ecosystems and incentives in attracting global talent at a time when easily accessible technology allows people to live and work anywhere. Peter Stoicheff, President of the University of Saskatchewan, stressed the urgency of investing in graduate education to fill Canada's gaps in research-capable business professionals and tech entrepreneurs.



## Key Takeaways

- **Multi-Directional Talent Flows:** Canada benefits from attracting talent from Asia while fostering mutual talent development through partnerships and research networks that don't rely solely on migration.
- **Universities Connecting the Global and the Local:** Attracting international students while being attentive and responsive to local communities and business sectors is a crucial role for universities that facilitates local economic development and resilience while contributing to the competitive advantage of local and regional industries.
- **Invest in Graduate Education for Economic Competitiveness:** Boosting graduate education and integrating advanced degree holders into industry is vital to spur innovation and productivity.
- **Economic Benefits of Lifelong Learning:** Singapore's SkillsFuture program shows how upskilling and mid-career reskilling, supported by government and industry, can help align workforces with rapid economic and technological shifts.
- **Remote Work and Ecosystem Agility Matter:** With tech talent increasingly decentralized, jurisdictions – whether city regions, provinces or federal governments – will benefit from cultivating ecosystems to attract globally mobile innovators.



# Canadian Investment in Research for Development in Asia



From left: Jean-Louis Arcand, President, Global Development Network; Kapil Kapoor, Regional Director, Asia, International Development Research Centre (IDRC); Julia Scott, Vice-President, Member Services, Universities Canada (moderator); Helani Galpaya, Chief Executive Officer, LirneAsia; Joe Wong, Vice-President, International, University of Toronto.

## Executive Summary

The panel on “Canadian Investment in Research for Development in Asia” brought together leading voices from academia, government, and civil society to explore the evolving landscape of Canada-Asia research collaboration focused on investing Canadian resources in research in Asia to develop positive impacts in the region.

Panellists discussed the importance of capacity-building partnerships and research co-creation to ensure development research is impactful and sustainable. Participants also highlighted the importance of integrating research into development practice by embedding it into policy and programming cycles in ways that are flexible and respond to local needs.

Discussion included Canada’s strong track record in global research partnerships, including the International Development Research Centre (IDRC), which since 2016 has invested over

“Asia is very complex; the countries are very different. We have programs in 32 countries across Asia right now... We’ve been particularly successful in creating an incredible network of over 200 think-tanks, civil society organizations, [and] NGOs, that are now contributing to sustain policy reform across the continent.”

– Kapil Kapoor, Regional Director, Asia, International Development Research Centre (IDRC)

C\$500 million in research initiatives across developing Asia and the Pacific, helping to build local research capacity and to generate evidence-based solutions for complex local and regional challenges.

Some positive impacts of evidence-based policy catalyzed by multi-year IDRC-funded research include reducing the incidence of liver cancer in people in Thailand through research that drastically reduced the occurrence of fish parasites that cause liver cancers when inadvertently consumed by humans, and increasing farmers' incomes through research that led to the development of a plant extract that increases the shelf life of fruit.

However, challenges persist, including ongoing funding gaps, the evolving nature of geopolitics and national political landscapes leading to shrinking spaces for independent research, and a mistrust of the motivation of international funders and partners. In response, panellists suggested more nimble and long-term funding mechanisms, stronger private sector engagement, and building funding structures akin to blended finance for research.



## Key Takeaways

- **Invest in Equitable Research Partnerships:** Development research leads to more impactful outcomes when co-created with local stakeholders, ensuring projects are grounded in context and aligned with community priorities.
- **Canadian Investments Are Making a Difference:** Investments in research by Canadian institutions such as IDRC are leading to positive impacts across Asia in multiple sectors, including health, sustainable food systems, governance, climate change adaptation, and more.
- **Bridge Research and Policy Implementation:** Embedding research into policy development from planning to implementation through evaluation drives greater impact.
- **Leveraging Multiple Investment Partners for Greater Impact:** Canadian investments in research in Asia, and the Global South more generally, frequently leverage contributions from funding agencies in Europe and international philanthropic foundations to increase funding, scope, and impact.
- **University Resilience Matters:** Higher education institutions in the Global South can be centres of research dynamism that lead to positive policy to address local and regional challenges; strategic support from Canadian institutions is bolstering resilience in this important area.

# Canada-Asia Co-operation in Space



From left: Ian G. McKay, Ambassador of Canada to Japan, and Prime Minister's Special Envoy for the Indo-Pacific (moderator); Shawna Pandya, Commercial Astronaut, International Institute for Astronautical Sciences (IIAS) & Director, IIAS Space Medicine Group; Koichi Wakata, Astronaut and Chief Technology Officer, Asia-Pacific Region, Axiom Space.

## Executive Summary

The “Canada-Asia Co-operation in Space” Gala Dinner at CIAC2025 offered an inspiring, forward-looking dialogue on international collaboration in space exploration and innovation. Moderated by Canada’s Ambassador to Japan and Prime Minister’s Special Envoy to the Indo-Pacific, Ian McKay, the session featured astronaut Dr. Koichi Wakata, Chief Technology Officer for the Asia-Pacific Region at Axiom Space, who had an over 30-year career with the Japan Aerospace Exploration Agency (JAXA), and Canadian astronaut candidate and Director of the International Institute for Astronautical Sciences’ Space Medicine Group, Dr. Shawna Pandya. Both speakers emphasized the critical role of global partnerships in advancing humanity’s presence in space, sharing personal journeys that underscore the value of international training, research, mentorship, and hard work.

Dr. Wakata reflected on his 504 days in space and highlighted Japan’s contributions to the International Space Station (ISS), including the Kibo lab and Kounotori cargo vehicle. He also recalled his time in space with Canadian astronauts Robert Thirsk and Julie Payette.

“ We need to build bridges amongst our international partners, amongst disciplines, amongst pharmaceutical companies, amongst R&D, amongst the semiconductor companies, because that’s how we build a sustainable presence in space. It can’t be all Canada, it can’t be all Japan... now more than ever, I’m convinced of the value of teamwork.”

– Dr. Shawna Pandya, Research Astronaut, International Institute for Astronautical Sciences (IIAS) & Director, IIAS Space Medicine Group



Dr. Pandya shared her goals around space medicine, the commercialization of research, and her upcoming participation in a commercial research spaceflight in 2026 with an all-female international crew.

The discussion covered groundbreaking applications like pharmaceuticals developed in microgravity and upcoming transitions to commercial space stations led by companies like Axiom Space. Both astronauts emphasized that space is no longer the exclusive purview of government space programs – today's access spans entrepreneurs, engineers, scientists, artists, and more. The session concluded with a call to action for young dreamers who want to lead humanity's future in space to aim high, work hard, and learn from setbacks.



## Key Takeaways

- **Global Collaboration is Essential for Space**

**Advancement:** Both Wakata and Pandya emphasized that no single country can tackle the complexity of future space missions alone. Government and commercial co-operation across Canada, Japan, and beyond is crucial for advancing Moon and Mars exploration, developing human health treatments in space, and moving toward new space-based economies such as in-space manufacturing.

- **Space as a Platform for Earth-based Innovation:** The panel spotlighted real-world benefits of space research – including a cancer drug reformulated in microgravity for better delivery and patient outcomes. Microgravity is becoming a lab for life-altering innovations in medicine, materials science, and telecommunications.

- **Commercial Spaceflight is Expanding Access and Opportunity:** Private companies like Axiom Space are

expanding space access. Dr. Pandya's upcoming mission with an all-female crew exemplifies this shift toward broader inclusion in human spaceflight.

- **Canada's Leadership in Robotics, Space Health is Globally Respected:** Canada's robotic technologies, especially the Canadarm, were repeatedly praised for their excellence and reliability. Canadian astronauts continue to play pivotal roles in international missions, with Jeremy Hansen set to become the first non-U.S. astronaut to orbit the Moon.
- **Inspiration, Resilience, Role Models are Key to the Next Generation:** Both speakers shared personal stories of being inspired by pioneers in space from earlier generations. They stressed the importance of dreaming big, embracing failure as a learning tool, and building diverse, interdisciplinary teams to lead the future of space.

# Navigating Geopolitical Risk, Recasting Global Supply Chains



From left: Vina Nadjibulla, Vice-President, Research & Strategy, Asia Pacific Foundation of Canada (moderator); Gautam Chadda, Head of Investment and Portfolio Advisory, Singapore, RBC Wealth Management; Melissa Kennedy, Executive Vice President, Chief Legal & Public Policy Officer, Sun Life, and Board Member, Asia Pacific Foundation of Canada; Janet Pau, Executive Director, Asia Business Council; Mark Schaan, Deputy Secretary to the Cabinet – Artificial Intelligence, Government of Canada; Peter Mumford, Practice Head, Southeast Asia, Eurasia Group.

## Executive Summary

At a time when geopolitical instability – from uncertainty surrounding U.S. tariffs and the war in Ukraine to U.S.-China competition – continues to disrupt global trade, the “Navigating Geopolitical Risk, Recasting Global Supply Chains” panel offered a clear-eyed look at how Canada-based and Asia-based leaders are adapting investment and supply chain strategies in response to a more uncertain world. The conversation, moderated by Vina Nadjibulla, the Asia Pacific Foundation of Canada’s Vice-President, Research & Strategy, coalesced around responding to global uncertainty while emphasizing business diversification for resilience, corporate agility, opportunities for international collaboration, and the potential for artificial intelligence (AI) to transform supply chain efficiency.

The panel discussed risks associated with elevated U.S. tariffs, including a major reduction in Chinese manufactured goods entering the U.S., leading to excess manufacturing capacity in

**“How can middle powers survive and thrive amid increasing tensions between the world’s two superpowers? ... No country has strategic autonomy; in terms of supply chains, many countries are trying to diversify, and there is a lot of strategic space and opportunity for co-operation.”**

– Janet Pau, Executive Director, Asia Business Council



China that could threaten manufacturers in Southeast Asia as Chinese manufacturers seek new markets for their goods. While higher U.S. tariffs offer strategic opportunities for countries and regions (such as Canada and Southeast Asia) to elevate their co-operation, uncertainty surrounding such tariffs greatly complicates corporate decision-making.

Panellists encouraged companies to lean into AI to help optimize their supply chains' precision and functioning, which could be transformational if companies possess the skills and capacity to deploy such advanced analytics. The panel also featured a robust discussion of supply chains for AI itself, which include complementary supply chains for chips, data, compute capacity, energy, and skills. Each of these supply chains is experiencing a fundamental reordering in response to the Trump administration's inconsistent tariff messaging and implementation, as well as its attempts to dismantle parts of the Inflation Reduction Act and the CHIPS Act, which both provide incentives for aspects of AI supply chains.



## Key Takeaways

- **Shift from Efficiency to Resilience:** Panellists noted that uncertainty caused by U.S. tariff announcements is causing a global pivot from lean, cost-optimized supply chains to more resilient, diversified ones.
- **Details Drive Diversification:** Finding replacement inputs and customers in new markets might not be sufficient for continued growth; finding opportunities for strategic co-operation and partnerships with international partners – including with trade frameworks such as the CPTPP – can help bolster resilience.
- **Scenario Planning for Geopolitical Risk:** Companies and governments are encouraged to plan responses to multiple geopolitical scenarios, focusing on how different situations would affect corporate (or government) actions and strategy.
- **AI for Supply Chains:** The use of AI and data analytics was identified as a critical enabler of agile supply chains. High-quality data and the skills to incorporate AI into supply chain decision-making are required to improve supply chain optimization.
- **Agile Investment Strategies:** While geopolitical uncertainty can lead to cautious investment decision-making, agility and the willingness to reposition liquidity and risk to resilient assets are real advantages in this turbulent environment.

# Asia's Sustainable Infrastructure Opportunity



*From left: Anbumozhi Venkatachalam, Director of Research Strategy and Innovations, Economic Research Institute for ASEAN and East Asia (ERIA) (moderator); Devin Chan, Deputy Executive Director, Infrastructure Asia; Samantha Hill, Head of Sustainability Integration, CPP Investments; Suzanne Gaboury, Director General, Private Sector Operations Department, Asian Development Bank; Lori Kerr, Chief Executive Officer, FinDev Canada.*

## Executive Summary

The closing plenary panel of the Canada-in-Asia Conference 2025, “Asia’s Sustainable Infrastructure Opportunity,” brought together leaders from across the public and private sectors to discuss the rapidly evolving infrastructure landscape in Asia, the imperative that infrastructure be sustainable, and growing opportunities and need for Canada-Asia collaboration. As Asia faces a multi-trillion-dollar infrastructure gap, the panel emphasized the urgency of transitioning towards low-carbon, climate-resilient, and socially inclusive infrastructure.

Panelists explored how Canada’s strengths – including in major project financing, equity investment, clean technology, and climate risk assessment – can align with Asia’s growing infrastructure needs. Speakers highlighted that infrastructure in Asia is not only about physical assets but also about embedding sustainability principles into policy, planning, and

**“** FinDev Canada has boots on the ground now in Asia so that we can build partnerships and deepen partnerships in the region, because as I often say to my team, our business moves at the speed of trust. And we’re here for the long term. Canada is here for the long term.”

– Lori Kerr, Chief Executive Officer, FinDev Canada

financing from the outset. The discussion showcased case studies from across Asia, including multi-country renewable energy investments in Southeast Asia, that reflect the promise and potential of scaling sustainable infrastructure.

Panellists also underlined the importance of public-private collaboration, clarity around regulatory systems and policy frameworks, and data and process transparency to attract investment and ensure long-term returns. Speakers also shared their institutional priorities, which included encouraging deep engagement through partnerships, sustainability in service of investment performance, and multiple approaches to project de-risking. Ultimately, the session emphasized that sustainable infrastructure is a shared opportunity to simultaneously promote economic growth and environmental resilience.



## Key Takeaways

- Canadian Institutions are Important Partners:** FinDev Canada, Canada's development finance institution, announced the opening of its first Asia office (in Singapore) at the conference and is expanding its presence in the region with a key focus on infrastructure. CPP Investments, the global investment management organization that invests Canada Pension Plan funds, has about 19% of its assets under management in the Asia Pacific region, much of it across different types of infrastructure.
- The Need is Great:** The Asian Development Bank (ADB) estimates that developing Asia needs about US\$1.7 billion annually in investment for its infrastructure needs when climate change mitigation and adaptation costs are factored in. Current annual investment is about half this figure.
- Policy Transparency and Planning:** Regulatory and policy transparency must be built into upstream project development, not just downstream execution. Early-stage planning that incorporates detailed feedback from potential investors helps ensure project viability.
- Replicable, Innovative Finance Structures:** Structures that incorporate blended finance models, development financing, and private capital that can be replicated across major projects offer an opportunity to significantly advance sustainable infrastructure.
- Partnerships, Partnerships, Partnerships:** Panellists identified partnerships at all points of the sustainable infrastructure process as necessary for success, including partnerships between investors, when developing policy and regulations, or among infrastructure stakeholders in project development.



# About the Asia Pacific Foundation of Canada

The Asia Pacific Foundation of Canada (APF Canada) is an independent not-for-profit organization focused on Canada's relations with Asia. APF Canada is dedicated to strengthening ties between Canada and Asia through its research, education, and convening activities. For over four decades, our research has provided high-quality, relevant, and timely information, insights, and perspectives on Canada-Asia relations for Canadians and stakeholders across the Asia Pacific. Our mission is to be Canada's catalyst for engagement with Asia and Asia's bridge to Canada.



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