



# Commentary

February 2020

## Navigating a New Canadian Course in the Indo-Pacific

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David Mulrone

Good evening, and thank you for this opportunity to help launch our panel discussion focussing on Canada and the Indo-Pacific region.

I've been looking forward to this for some time because it allows us to do some fresh thinking about Canadian foreign policy. While the notion of an Indo-Pacific region isn't at all new, Canada has been slow to embrace it, to look at a very important part of the world from a different perspective.

Indeed, simply *making* the effort to think carefully about foreign policy options has rarely been more important, or urgent.

We're at the close of a long year, 12 months and then some, during which we've been compelled to re-examine our relationship with a country that has become, arguably, our second most important partner. I speak, of course, of China.

More than that, it has been a year during which Canadian foreign policy *itself* has been on trial.

We've been reminded of our vulnerability to China's economic coercion and, worse, of its willingness to use our own citizens as hostages.

We've been shown, repeatedly and to our great cost, the dangers of a foreign policy that is largely reactive. Too often, our "comprehensive engagement" of China has been an excuse for foreign policy on auto-pilot, in which we seem to go along to get along, and in which flattery often replaces facts.

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We've been divided as a country. We have a China lobby, one that includes a who's who of former ministers and mandarins, extolling the economic importance of our relationship with Beijing, while a growing number of China sceptics worry that any financial benefits from China tend to be selectively and strategically distributed, and come, ultimately, at the peril of our very autonomy as a nation.

Perhaps most worrying is that the government has appeared to endorse both sides of this debate, although not, fortunately, at the same time. But we've seen little evidence of new thinking, little inclination by Ottawa to work out how we deal with a country that is both an important partner and an adversary.

So, while it is timely indeed to consider renewing our foreign policy focus, starting with a broader and less China-centric view of Asia, *all of it*, and the Pacific, we should first ensure that we've internalized the lessons of the past year.

A successful Canadian engagement of the Indo-Pacific region involves a lot more than spinning the globe and tweaking ministerial travel schedules.

But taking the time to get it right offers us the opportunity to move from a foreign policy that is broken, unrealistic and inadequate, to something that truly advances our interests and protects us, to the extent possible, from threats to our security, prosperity and well being.

Let me assert at the outset that I am very confident we can do this. We've managed to do it before, albeit inconsistently. And while reaching that level again, and staying there, will be a major challenge, it's one that we're up to.

It occurs to me that I've just also described the Toronto Maple Leafs' prospects for making the playoffs.

Real foreign policy involves thinking clearly about who and what we are as a country, about a limited number of achievable objectives, about national assets and liabilities, and about partners, e.g., who they are, what they want and where they're going.

And it's about spending at least as much time listening, interpreting and understanding, as broadcasting and lecturing.

We're rightly proud of our skills as multilateralists, but that often masks the fact that we can be fickle and inconsistent bilateralists. A regional strategy is of no use if it isn't anchored in a network of strong, country-to-country relationships.

And although our partners are too polite to say this, that means something more than having a minister show up to assert that "Canada is back" every few years.

Trade is absolutely central to our agenda, but a successful strategy has to be about more than trade. It's also about our security, and the security of our closest allies.

And let's be absolutely honest here. You can't aspire to any real status in the Indo-Pacific region without a robust, expeditionary military capability, one that is perceived by our allies to be both credible and beneficial

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This points to the hard truth that strong and effective foreign policy is an outgrowth of strong and effective domestic policy, meaning a sound economy, healthy national institutions and national infrastructure, and, yes, the willingness to invest, and invest significantly, in our own security and defence.

Finally, we should by no means recreate in an Indo-Pacific strategy the errors of our *Asia-Pacific* strategy, which, at its most threadbare, has become little more than an uncritical, unexamined and unbalanced China policy.

Make no mistake, it is late in the day. But it's not too late to get things right, particularly since the kind of thoughtful, focussed and carefully informed approach that we need to bring to our policy in the Indo-Pacific is the very approach that should characterize Canadian foreign policy writ large.

I can think of no better place to start.

Let's begin by paying India the respect of seeing it as it is, rather than as it exists in our Canadian imaginations. And let's be confident enough to understand that while we will agree about many things, we will disagree about others.

Our ability to understand India was eroded during years in which we substituted lectures for dialogue, and during which we viewed India through the very narrow prism of its relationship with Pakistan.

Unfortunately, we're in danger of replacing an arrogant and aloof approach to India with a cringeworthy kind of neediness that is deservedly being rebuffed by New Delhi.

We should not force the pace of relationship building, but take the time to identify shared objectives. These obviously include trade, education, and science and technology cooperation, but they should also include enhanced defence cooperation and a renewal of dialogue *and trust* on broader security issues.

We should be more ambitious about our relationships with Japan and Korea, both of which have strong foundations but unfinished superstructures. Both deserve consistent, high-level Canadian attention.

We can do far, far more with Taiwan, even within the constraints of the One China policy. This requires more energy, imagination and courage on our part, but it could also benefit from greater effort by Taiwan to understand our priorities and perspectives, and to see us as something more than America in miniature.

My time as head of mission in Taipei left me deeply impressed by Taiwan's democracy, by its vibrant civil society, and by the many opportunities it offers for cooperation with Canada.

We should view Australia and New Zealand, not just as Commonwealth partners, but also as charter members in a global community of democratic middle powers, all of whom have a stake in pushing back against Chinese coercion, pressure and interference.

We should aspire to a multi-faceted, *anchoring* relationship with Singapore that has among its objectives contributing to the restoration of our credibility within ASEAN.

And, finally, no Canadian engagement of Asia, however we describe it, can exclude China. But we do need to shift from our present policy of comprehensive engagement, to an approach that is much more selective and carefully managed. One that is more balanced, aligned with our interests and attuned to our vulnerabilities.

This is, of course, the same discipline that should characterize our approach to the entire region, whatever side we view it from. Getting it right would represent a first step in the direction of real foreign policy, of taking responsibility for navigating our Canadian course in a new world.

We can do this! It's time to begin the conversation!

# About the Author



**D**avid Mulrone is a Distinguished Fellow at the University of Toronto's Munk School of Global Affairs and Public Policy. He served as Ambassador of Canada to the People's Republic of China from 2009 to 2012.

Prior to his appointment to Beijing, Mr. Mulrone was assigned to the Privy Council Office in Ottawa as the Deputy Minister responsible for the Afghanistan Task Force, overseeing inter-departmental coordination of all aspects of Canada's engagement in Afghanistan. He also served as Secretary to the Independent Panel on Canada's Future Role in Afghanistan ("the Manley Panel").

Mr. Mulrone's other assignments included serving as Associate Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs and, concurrently, as the Prime Minister's Personal Representative to the G8 Summit. Immediately prior to that, he served as Foreign and Defence Policy Advisor to the Prime Minister of Canada.

A career Foreign Service officer, Mr. Mulrone had a series of senior appointments in the Foreign Affairs Department in Ottawa, including 4 years as Canada's Senior Official for Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC). He served on overseas assignments in Taipei, Kuala Lumpur, Shanghai and Seoul. From 1995 to 1998 he was Executive Director of the Canada-China Business Council.

Mr. Mulrone joined the Foreign Service in 1981 and participated in full-time Mandarin training at the Canadian Forces Language School.

From 2015-2018, he served as President and Vice Chancellor of the University of St. Michael's College. He currently represents the Archdiocese of Toronto on the board that governs the city's three Catholic hospitals.



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