



True North in
Canadian public policy

GLOBAL SECURITY LOOK AHEAD

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Why Canada Should Shift Its Military Focus to Asia

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International relations theory tells us much about contemporary alliance structures and the emerging role Canada may have to play in the Pacific.

To begin with we must understand middle powers are not as limited in their potential as small powers, but they do lack the small-power privilege of protection from great powers. Small powers are non-threatening to their larger neighbours, while any great power hostile to them is likely to be inhibited by other great powers unwilling to accept the former's further aggrandizement.

That is how the Low Countries of Europe retained their independence as the Benelux trio of Belgium, Luxembourg, and the Netherlands, instead of being annexed by their greater neighbours. The British, French, and later German, great powers were each unwilling to let their rivals absorb them. Finland likewise was protected from Soviet Russia's 1939 invasion by word of British and French interventions, by Germany's pregnant silence as Russia's then covertly hostile ally, and by Sweden's generous support. North Vietnam was protected from the United States by both the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China, at that time divided by an uncompromising rivalry except for their joint support of Vietnam's struggle. In 1905 Japan was very much the small power as compared to the Russian Empire and accordingly benefited from British and American support.

All of this is in perfect accordance with the paradoxical logic of strategy which prohibits any form of linear progression in the realm of conflict. This logic ordains that great powers can defeat middle powers, but not small ones.

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Middle powers must fend for themselves when faced by potentially hostile great powers. However, they do have the privilege of structural adaptation for self-defence on a larger scale than comparable small powers. They can also aggrandize themselves by offering protection to adjacent small powers that have something to contribute to an alliance. Nor does the paradoxical logic of strategy prevent them from seeking a great power's protection as Canada has with the US.

Sweden's highly armed neutrality during the Cold War years is an interesting case of a potentially vulnerable middle power using structural adaptation. Having rejected the development of nuclear weapons, Sweden's post-Second World War governments instead chose aggrandizement. They strove to enhance Sweden's own inadequate power by strategically co-opting its smaller neighbours. Sweden offered tacit but credible security guarantees to Finland, Denmark, and Norway — the latter two members of NATO — by making itself the dominant tactical air power of Northern Europe. This was not a cheap proposition. It required a multi-decade effort to produce and operate successive generations of combat aircraft. The aim was to preclude a Soviet non-nuclear victory by providing air support to the Finnish army — strong in every way except in air power — and to the Norwegians who were faced with the task of guarding an impossibly long frontier. In exchange, neutral Sweden gained greater strategic depth to secure and defend its own regional interests.

Which brings us to the Pacific today, where shifting alliances of middle powers are contending with a new, aggressive great power — China.

Canada as a Pacific Power

Like Sweden after 1945, Canada is today faced by a radically changed strategic environment that presents new threats and requires structural adaptation.

Long-term strategic struggles — such as the mostly tacit confrontation between China and the emerging Japan-Vietnam-India coalition that seeks to contain China with Australian and US support — are characterized by the constant weaving and unweaving of alliances. In this emerging contest allies will be gained or lost on each side. It appears, for example, that the Chinese government has succeeded in recruiting the leaders of the Philippines and the Malaysian Federation to its side. While Manila and Kuala Lumpur may well change their minds again, both countries are inherently small states with weak armed forces that add little to either side of the emerging Asian divide.

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Canada could add much to the coalition countering China. Indeed, it is the most globally significant of all middle powers, but historically, the country has looked mostly eastwards to Europe rather than westwards to the Pacific. Canada has notably failed to change its orientation as the global situation has evolved around it, shifting the world's centre of gravity towards the Pacific.

One indication of what Canada could do as a Pacific middle power stems from its role in the overall efforts of NATO, of which it is undoubtedly an important member. For decades, a Canadian armoured brigade group was stationed in Germany, as were Canadian tactical air squadrons. Canadian naval forces were largely devoted to the security of trans-Atlantic shipping routes in wartime, when the Soviet Union was expected to focus its air, surface, and sub-surface efforts on cutting off NATO's European forces from reinforcement and resupply from North America. Canada was well represented in alliance headquarters and in supervisory bodies.

During the Cold War, the Canadian effort on the Pacific side was much smaller, with only a modest portion of its navy allocated to the Maritime Forces Pacific, which was headquartered in Esquimalt, B.C. Even less of its air power was involved because tactical air power (as opposed to maritime reconnaissance aircraft) was of little use without overseas bases which were in Europe, but not in Japan, Korea, or the Philippines.

Since then the global strategic situation has changed radically. In spite of Russian President Vladimir Putin's best efforts to keep war going in parts of Ukraine, it has emigrated from its historic principal home in Western and Central Europe to several Islamic countries and to East Asia, far more importantly. China's potentially global imperialism has led to the emergence of the anti-China coalition centred on Japan, Vietnam, and India, with nearby adjuncts. Australia has strongly expressed support for the coalition and the US provides inherent and additional security and nuclear guarantees. There is also North Korea, which is in the process of weaponizing its already tested nuclear devices, while developing ballistic missiles to deliver warheads over ranges that will include Canada and the US by approximately 2020.

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One thing that is not new in today's strategic environment is Russia's return as an active power manifested in Europe, the Arctic, and the Middle East. However, China's arrival as an active Pacific power is not merely an automatic consequence of its economic growth, but rather reflects a definite policy change. It would appear that China's leaders badly misread the 2007-2008 financial crisis and greatly overestimated China's gain in relative strategic power. This prompted them to abandon the very successful "peaceful rise" (中国和平崛起) or "peaceful development" (中国和平发展) foreign policy officially presented in 2004, but long practised before then. This policy set aside all Chinese claims against regional parties in order to have everyone's co-operation in China's economic growth.

Once that policy was abandoned, there ensued the loud and practically simultaneous assertion of Chinese territorial claims against Japan, the Philippines, Malaysia, the Sultanate of Brunei, Indonesia, Vietnam, and India, in a half-circle of expansionist pretensions. Newly aggressive forms of border and maritime patrolling, increasingly frequent territorial intrusions, and even outright occupations added greatly to the concerns provoked by China's verbal demands.

Inevitably, the threatened countries started to strengthen themselves militarily and to coalesce diplomatically. They did this mostly in pairs that became increasingly interconnected, but also in threes, as in the case of the India-Japan-Vietnam trio that accelerated Vietnam's deployment of Russian submarines.

Australia's exceptional activism is particularly notable within this coalescence and relevant for Canadian consideration. Since 2009 successive Australian governments greatly helped to weave together the emerging coalition, not least by bringing in the usually lethargic Malaysian Federation (notwithstanding its leader's recent tilt towards Beijing). Australia has long had something of an alliance within the Five Power Defence Arrangements (along with the UK, New Zealand, Malaysia and Singapore) under which Australian aircraft and troops rotate in the Butterworth base on the west coast of the Malay Peninsula. The base serves as the headquarters of the Integrated Area Defence System for Malaysia and Singapore, and is commanded by an Australian air vice-marshal.

Also notable and relevant for Canada has been the reaction of successive Australian governments to Chinese reminders of the importance of its raw material purchases for the Australian economy. These reminders were coupled with admonitions about Australian foreign policy, which the government explained is not for sale.

Given Canada's propensity to assume international responsibilities, Northeast Asia's strategic situation presents three different elements that should amply justify the re-direction of Canada's strategic attention to the Pacific:

1. An ever more important China whose expansionism is in need of dissuasion—it does stop when resisted, as both Japan and Vietnam have demonstrated;
2. A North Korea that will soon have the capacity to attack Canada as well as the US with nuclear weapons, and whose sole leader is easily offended; and
3. Japan, a country of the first importance for Canada in several ways not merely economic, and which needs external support and foreign security guarantees in order to safely remain a non-nuclear power.

Nobody can reasonably suggest that Canada should restructure its armed forces on a very large scale in order to become a major power in Northeast Asia. But given that Canadian political and economic leaders know very well that the centre of gravity in world politics has changed, it would behoove Canada to gradually acquire a significant stabilizing role, in the agreeable company of Australia.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Edward N. Luttwak is a senior associate at the Center for Strategic & International Studies. He has worked as a consultant to the US State Department, the National Security Council, the US Secretary of Defense, and the US Air Force, Army, and Navy, among other institutions. He is the author of numerous books, including *The Grand Strategy of the Roman Empire*, *The Endangered American Dream*, and *Strategy: The Logic of War and Peace*. He is a member of the editorial boards of the *Washington Quarterly* and *Géopolitique*.



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