

**Canada's Role in the Asia-Pacific  
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***A focus on international cooperation can come at the expense of Canadian national interests***

The South China Sea—or rather the Asian continent as a whole—is a giant-size chess board. All the pieces are set and in play.

Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper is expected to arrive tomorrow in Beijing with a close-up view of the chessboard -- scheduled to sit down with Chinese President Hu Jintao and Premier Wen Jiabao to talk about a variety of issues -- the export of Canadian oil to China and possible investor protections for Canadian investors.

Canada has reached out to all nations in the region in the hopes of expanding its foreign relations. These efforts, however, aren't simply goodwill gestures but efforts to secure the country's interests in the region. If this century should belong to Asia then Canada would do well to make its presence known. The potential and unrealized benefits are simply too good to pass up.

But securing Canada's interests in the region has also meant dealing with less-than-democratic states. The biggest and most talked about is China, whose democratic and human rights record leaves much to be desired. Canada's leaders, past and present, have attacked China on these issues on one hand while making nice and talking about the bright future of Chinese-Canadian relations on the other.

Hypocritical, perhaps, but some would argue that it is politically necessary. Criticisms against Chinese crackdowns on democratic and human rights activities are legitimate. That said, our leaders are fully aware of the opportunities at hand by establishing good relations with China.

Nevertheless, at some point Canada must decide where its core interests lie in the Asia-Pacific. If it is to promote democracy and human rights, as the country claims to have done so for decades, then Ottawa must re-evaluate its continued relationship with China and other states. Words will mean little if actions do not reflect intentions. On the other hand, if the government chooses to prioritize continued economic relations then it must be willing to overlook some of the more unsavory aspects of its regional partners.

Canada can't enjoy the best of both worlds. Eventually it must choose, especially if the South China Sea disputes erupt into something much more. We need to make compromises, but where do we draw the line? When the time comes and we are forced to choose, we must base that decision on Canada's best interest and not on the opinions of others. Most importantly, however, we must also stay true to the core principles of our foreign policy.

**Who we are in the world**

Canada is a brand, much like Nike, Ford and Sony; and much like brand-name products, being Canadian or coming from Canada holds a certain value. With respect to trade, our

value can be gleaned from our market strength and economic health, our imports and exports. Other than that, the Canadian brand is an intangible. We don't know what it is, but we can guess by judging the actions and reactions of others when they deal with Canada. What others say about us speak volumes about who we are, not because what they say is true, but because that is the perception they have of us. It might not be true to us, but it's true to them.

There's no better marketer of Canada than Canadians travelling abroad. Our tourists and expatriates are our primary ambassadors, because these individuals may be the only Canadians ever seen or talked to by citizens living in another country. First impressions count, and how our tourists and expatriates dress, talk, and behave will be the only measuring stick these foreign citizens have of all Canadians, unless they meet another. Our brand name rises and falls with each Canadian that travels abroad.

In the same vein, our value on the global stage rises and falls with every decision our leaders make. But how much value should we put in the opinion of others? If every decision we made was based on how others perceived us, would we be better or worse off? That is a hypothetical question for another day; however, what is less hypothetical is that any decision made by our leaders should go towards advancing and protecting Canadian interests, even if that requires stepping on some toes. Politically correct or palatable? Perhaps not, but sometimes necessary.

Internationalists we may be, but our sovereignty should never be compromised. Sometimes going along just to get along isn't the best course of action. The right decision on the world stage might be the wrong decision for those of us at home.

### **Playing a role**

In the South China Sea maritime and territorial disputes, battle lines are drawn primarily between China and those countries against it. The United States has maintained a cautious distance from the disputes, insisting its support for freedom of the seas and a peaceful resolution between all parties. That said, US joint military exercises with the Philippines and Vietnam, both of which are vocal opponents of China in the matter, might suggest otherwise.

And where are we in all of this?

In these disputes, Canada has been mostly silent, which is not to say it has ignored the situation altogether. Much like the US, Canada has urged all parties to resolve the situation peacefully, and that international law and agreements are respected. Beyond that, we don't seem to have a dog in this fight. We cannot risk jeopardizing our relationship with China, so we walk a fine line. And for the moment, this appears to be the best course of action.

Nevertheless, we should endeavor to be bold. We should endeavor to take big steps. As previously stated, if the century should belong to Asia, Canada should make its presence known. Outside of Southeast Asia, these disputes have garnered little attention, but its outcome has the potential of shaping the entire region. If our leaders need a reason then let there be one: Do this for Canada. There's much to gain in a peaceful and secure Asia-Pacific, and much to lose should these disputes dissolve into something far worse.

Where Canada played a mediating role in the Suez Crisis of 1956 when then-Egyptian leader nationalized the canal, we should seek to help bring these disputes to a close. A peaceful and secure Asia-Pacific is in our best interest. We shouldn't be afraid of taking on ambitious projects. We shouldn't be afraid of challenging ourselves and testing our limits. If fear should dictate our decisions in the future, we will never be able to realize our full potential. Of all the nations in the world, ours is a fairly young one.

We're still learning, and part of this learning process is finding our identity, our role in the world. We will make mistakes, but if we should make mistakes then it should be in the pursuit of something great.

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