



HOW FEMINIST IS CANADA'S INDO-PACIFIC STRATEGY?

PART II: THE 'NEEDS IMPROVEMENT'

BY MARYRUTH BELSEY PRIEBE AND
ASTHA CHADHA

Maryruth Belsey Priebe (maryruth@pacforum.org) is the Director for Women, Peace & Security (WPS) Programs and a Senior Fellow at Pacific Forum International, holds a Harvard International Relations graduate degree, is a member of the Research Network on Women, Peace & Security in Canada, and a Teaching Fellow at Harvard Extension School. Maryruth researches at the intersection of gender and climate security.

Astha Chadha (astha@pacforum.org) is a Women, Peace & Security (WPS) Fellow at Pacific Forum, PhD Candidate at Ritsumeikan Asia Pacific University in Japan, and a researcher at the university's Democracy Promotion Center. She is a Japanese Government MEXT scholar, and her research focuses on Japan-India relations, Indo-Pacific security, South Asian affairs, and impact of religion on international relations.

In [Part I](#) of this series, we examined Canada's 2022 [Indo-Pacific strategy](#) (CIPS or the Strategy) in terms of how well it aligned with the country's [Feminist International Assistance Policy](#) (FIAP), which is functionally Canada's feminist foreign policy (FFP). In Part II we take a deeper dive to examine ways the strategy could improve to better reflect the country's FFP aims on four issue areas: i) regional peace, resilience, and security, ii) boosting trade with and within the region, iii) norm-setting and commitment to rule of law, and iv) promoting people-to-people connections, and sustainable future.

Promoting peace, resilience, and security

While the Strategy aligns with [the FIAP](#) in a call for an increased presence of women in peacekeepers, it does not include an expansion of Canada's [Elsie Initiative on Increasing the number of Women in Peace Operations](#), a policy that has already set Canada apart as a FFP leader, wherein women's representation in roles includes their presence in positions of power.

More problematic is that CIPS, despite alluding to peace and conflict resolution, remains reliant on militarism, which is problematic for an already [over-militarized region](#). For instance, it has a strong emphasis on bolstering Canada's military and spy network, and, by aligning its language with other Western powers, the bulking up of Canada's military could potentially make it part of a disruptive force that stokes greater regional tensions at a time when a fresh, gender-sensitive approach is needed. More distressing is the confrontational tone on the People's Republic of China (more on this in the last section). The strategy brands China as a "disruptive global power," using more strident language regarding China than previous foreign policy. This approach may also be contrary to the wishes of countries in the region that [do not wish](#) to be caught in the middle of a great power struggle and rapid military build-up that could potentially stir regional instability.

Essentially, through securitization of several aspects of Canada's approach to the Indo-Pacific, the strategy is in tension with Canada's FFP, which may pose a challenge to regional stability and tarnish Canada's role as a global peacebuilder.

Boosting trade with and within the region

Canada's announcement of the [Women Entrepreneurship Strategy](#) (WES), as well as working collaboratively within existing regional structures, is a good start in carrying out the country's FFP in the economic arena. On the other hand, the trade section of the strategy isolates China by aligning with policies like the Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment, the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework for Prosperity (IPEF), and others that bypass China,

raising concerns of further antagonization of this regional competitor.

More importantly, the funding allocations within the strategy fail to tackle some anti-FFP aspects of existing trade policies. For instance, Canada has yet to remove its support for the Inclusive Trade Action Group's [investor-state dispute settlement](#) process that supports multinational corporations' penalization of countries introducing legitimate measures aimed at meeting human rights obligations and sustainable development goals, including those related to gender equality. The ISDS process has been used by Canadian mining companies to override the wishes of local communities related to water and land protection, and as such may inadvertently contribute to lowering of resilience and security of communities. Notably, gender-based violence (GBV) tends to increase when Canadian-owned extractive companies move into communities. In Indonesia, hundreds of Papua New Guinea women [have alleged](#) they have been raped by security personnel at these sites. [Some argue](#) that poorly designed trade policies like the ISDS allow Canadian companies to operate internationally with impunity, resulting in [negative socio-economic consequences](#) for impacted communities.

Furthermore, historically, trade policies have encouraged the [privatization of public services](#) such as healthcare, clean water, and education services. Such programs are consistent gender equalizers, and their loss can significantly undermine women's stability. Yet CIPS does not address concerns related to these and other problematic trade policies already in place.

Norm-setting and international normative frameworks

While the strategy does mention the aim to work within existing frameworks, especially those that prioritize regional voices, CIPS ignores some important agreements, like the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership, which includes 15 East Asian and Pacific nations of different economic sizes and stages of development including China; or the Asia-Pacific Trade Agreement that has been operating for nearly 50 years. Instead, FinDev

aligns itself with the US-sponsored IPEF which notably excludes China.

Furthermore, the [FFP Dialogue text](#) contains phrases such as, "dismantling persistent gender inequalities between women, men," and "transforming social norms, power relations and discriminatory social, political, legal, and economic systems and institutions and structures that perpetuate, intentionally or unintentionally, inequality and exclusion." Such activist language is a defining feature of Canada's FIAP, yet this activist approach is toned down in the strategy. In a region with some of the widest gender disparities, CIPS makes no mention of transforming norms that perpetuate gender inequalities or challenging unequal power relations and systemic discrimination. Neither does CIPS define Canada's foreign policy approach towards Indo-Pacific nations with more traditional gender roles, wherein, initiating a commitment to WPS would itself be a challenge. CIPS demonstrates awareness regarding Indo-Pacific diversity and state commitment to the WPS agenda. However, the document does not outline the significance of Canada's FFP approach in its strategic engagement with Indo-Pacific states that do not have a dedicated WPS policy.

Connecting people and building a sustainable green future

As noted in Part I, the strategy does make important references to expanding the FIAP and creating and expanding sustainable investment programs. However, given how closely tied development and non-traditional challenges like climate change are to women's empowerment, and how determinative [women's stability is in state stability](#), the strategy misses important opportunities to demonstrate Canada's FFP objectives. If 2022 taught us anything, it was that extreme climate events have already and will continue to have enormous and adverse and [costly](#) impacts on human wellbeing. Moreover, climate and other disasters are expected to exacerbate existing fragilities and tensions, particularly for the vulnerable, threatening to roll back hard-earned progress already made for the advancement of gender equality. So, a CIPS aligned with FFP principles on

development and non-traditional security threats is more crucial now than ever before.

Additionally, while the [Strategy](#) acknowledges that “China’s sheer size and influence makes cooperation necessary to...address existential pressures, such as climate change, biodiversity loss, and global health,” the strident stance on China in the rest of the Strategy makes it much more challenging to build Canada-China cooperation regarding key issues such as climate change or health security. If such language derails future talks in the short- and long-term, it will embody another significant opportunity lost for making progress on these crucial issues.

Conclusion

Looking at Canada’s Indo-Pacific Strategy as a whole, it is heavy on the militaristic rhetoric and confrontational toward China. While like-minded nations in the Indo-Pacific have commonly recognized the threat China poses to regional security, there is less consensus on how to address Beijing’s provocations. Though China poses a geopolitical challenge to norm-setting by the United States and other Indo-Pacific players, the region should not overlook the need to engage with Beijing for gender inclusive approaches to regional security, health, climate and growth through consistent cooperation and diplomatic dialogue. Canada, as a late entrant into the region, has the potential to play a larger role in promoting cooperation. Unfortunately, CIPS doesn’t offer many solutions. The strategy lacks the specificity, activism, and funding needed to tackle some of the most intransigent problems related to gender inequality, blunting its impact on regional peace and security.

How could future iterations of the policy improve? Canada should look to the Indo-Pacific people for how to approach China. More specifically, while there are many ASEAN voices expressing views on China’s role in the region, Canada should define future foreign policy in the Indo-Pacific based on greater consultation with Indo-Pacific women’s groups—who acutely understand security from [a grassroots perspective](#)—to gain their perspectives on China and other matters. Beyond this, updates to the strategy

should include reflection on whether CIPS implementation has demonstrated an effective whole-of-government integration and coordination with other federal feminist policies and initiatives. Without such self-examination and consultations, Canada’s approach to the Indo-Pacific is likely to mirror existing approaches to the Indo-Pacific with regard to women, peace and security and be no better than any other strategy on offer.

PacNet commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are always welcomed and encouraged.