

FOLLOW THE LEADER,
LOSE THE REGION

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Introduction

Framing a Canadian Strategy in the Asia-Pacific

In 2019, Canadian prime minister Justin Trudeau stood beside Japanese prime minister Shinzo Abe in Ottawa and called for greater Canadian-Japanese cooperation in the “Indo-Pacific.” Hailed in the Canadian media at the time as a sign of Canadian middle-power diplomacy, Trudeau’s comments left many in government and academic circles scratching their heads. Had Canada adopted an Indo-Pacific strategy toward Asia? Was the prime minister speaking off the cuff – perhaps inadvertently using Japan’s preferred nomenclature around the Asian region’s strategic environment – or was he purposefully and tactically aligning Canada’s strategic posture in Asia with the Abe government’s Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) vision? Did he understand that in adopting an Indo-Pacific framework for Canada’s foreign policy approach to Asia he was positioning his country to be a part of a controversial US-led strategy that many Asian states viewed as anti-Chinese in spirit and practice?¹

For some, such considerations were inconsequential. Canada should of course align its Asia-directed foreign and security policies with the United States and Japan – indeed, with any Western nation that shares Canada’s values with respect to the international rule of law and a liberal “rules-based order.”² At the time of Trudeau’s comments, Canada was, after all, in the midst of a confrontation with the People’s Republic of China (PRC) over Canada’s decision to detain Meng Wanzhou,

chief financial officer of the Chinese firm Huawei and a Chinese corporate celebrity, and China's reciprocal arrest of two Canadian citizens working in China, Michael Kovrig and Michael Spavor. In the face of increased Chinese pressure and growing uncertainty in Asia, surely Canada would want to work with the United States and other Western nations to secure its interests in the region?

For others, however, the prospect of Canadian alignment along an Indo-Pacific ideal was less than appealing. Far from being a workable vision of a future Asian order, some analysts argued, the Indo-Pacific ideal was instead a US-led, Defense Department-driven attempt to preserve American predominance over Asia's institutions.³ The Trump administration, in particular, articulated its Indo-Pacific vision in largely antagonistic, militaristic terms, with Secretary of Defense Mark Esper pledging in a 2020 speech in Hawaii that the United States would "not cede an inch" of Asia to any other state.⁴ Whatever Canada might gain from an Indo-Pacific alignment, these analysts warned, it equally stood to lose if it aligned itself with a consortium of states committed to self-preservation over regional stability.

For Canada, then, there seemed to be no clear answer in 2019 – or in 2020, 2021, or 2022 – as to the country's most effective approach to the Asia-Pacific, a region that Canadian policy-makers and business-people alike understood as full of opportunity but also as inherently difficult to navigate. Adding to this uncertainty was a hardening schism within the Canadian policy community over the approach Ottawa should take toward China, fostered in large part by commentary in the *Globe and Mail* that sought to frame those advocating Canada-China engagement as "naïve" or "soft on China" and those calling for Canada to adopt a harder line toward Beijing as "realists."⁵ Mirroring the groupthink in the United States over China's role in Asia and adopting the US-based narrative that Asia's liberal order was under threat, Canada's policy writers entered a period of analytical malaise at exactly the time when Ottawa most needed strategic creativity.

The Heart of the Matter

Part of Canada's challenge in shaping a domestic approach to the Asia-Pacific is the lack of sophisticated domestic debate around the region's developing dynamics, the primary result of Canadian policy analysts' continued reliance on Western narratives and paradigms when conceptualizing the Asian region.⁶ Rather than engaging in critical analysis of

Asia's security, governance, or economic trends – up to and including critique of Western assumptions toward the region – Canadian analysts instead almost uniformly frame their regional analysis within prescribed Western world views, many of which are either inherently biased or outright incorrect.⁷ The shared belief among Canadian scholars on Asia that the country's membership in the G7 gives it a middle-power advantage in the region, for instance, is based on the mistaken belief that Asian states continue to look to Western economies as the standard-bearers for international governance norms. Similarly, the nearly universal belief among Canadian policy writers that the Communist Party of China (CPC) is illiberal, unstable, and repressive undermines the basis for a more robust – indeed, informed – Canadian policy toward China.⁸

Not only does this parochial world view set a false starting point for Canadian policy development, but it also contributes to an ossification of dialogue in Canada around Asia's primary strategic dynamics. Canadian advocacy for alignment with the US-led Indo-Pacific strategy is a case in point, as those pushing for it do so with little, if any, reference to the strategy's broader strategic context. In debating whether or not Canada should align with the United States, or Japan, or indeed any Western democratic state around an Asia-Pacific strategy, for instance, Canadian analysts make broad, often incorrect, assumptions about the nature of contemporary Asian order, including the region's existing and emerging institutions, its great power dynamics, its values and norms, and, most consequentially, Canada's place within the region.⁹ More fundamentally, while an informed Canadian approach to Asia must necessarily address sensitive topics such as which states get to decide what constitutes Asian order, whether and to what degree China has a legitimate right to influence its own geographic region, and whether non-democratic states have the same legitimacy with respect to the international system, international institutions, and international mores, few Canadian policy analysts ever reference these issues in their writing.

From a policy development perspective, the lack of critical analysis in Canadian policy writing on the Asia-Pacific is problematic as there are a number of fundamental paradigms that Canadian policy-makers must address before developing an informed, national-level strategy toward the region. First, and arguably most consequentially, is whether the United States was, is, and will be Canada's best strategic partner for

a bilateral approach to the Asia-Pacific region. For too many Canadian analysts, the answer to this question is an uncritical “yes,” despite what many of these individuals identified as the Trump administration’s shortcomings and the continued uncertainty about the Biden administration’s approach to the Asia-Pacific.¹⁰

Canada and the United States share an ideational and civilizational identity, the argument goes, and therefore share the same national security goals in the Asian-Pacific region as a matter of course.¹¹ Further, only Washington has the capacity to shape Asian order with respect to institutions, international law, and great power relations, making it the most direct means for Canada to advance its own national interests within the region.¹² Moreover, Washington is the “indispensable nation” in Asia and has inarguably played a moderating role in the postwar era, structuring the region’s security environment through its alliance system and providing security as a regional public good through its forward military presence.¹³ For a state like Canada that lacks the agency to effect regional change on its own, partnership with the United States offers the clearest and arguably most natural path forward.¹⁴ Failure to realize this value proposition in Canada-US relations is, according to some, a failure to understand the nature of international relations, particularly in a region where power is the ultimate arbitrator.

Closer analysis of the US role in Asia, however, suggests that such unmitigated optimism is unwarranted. Rather than providing a net strategic benefit, the Canada-US relationship can be a burden for Ottawa, particularly when Canada seeks to demonstrate autonomy in the region.¹⁵ Further, far from offering a strategic way forward for Canada, the United States under the Obama and Trump administrations has become largely defence-dependent in both its strategic thinking and operational engagement and outreach, a policy approach the Biden administration is set to continue through its participation in newly minted, Western-led institutions like the AUKUS trilateral and the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (the Quad).¹⁶ No longer the regional hegemon, the United States is rather Asia’s predominant security actor, running much of its diplomacy and engagement through the Department of Defense, not the Department of State.¹⁷ As such, American policy-makers view Asia through a security lens, particularly with respect to China’s activities in the region.¹⁸ Washington’s reliance on this framework for planning and operations neither offers Canada a

model for engagement nor provides it with a non-securitized role for collaboration.

Second, and closely related, is the nature of Canada's relations with Western states and actors in Asia more broadly. Australia, the European Union, France, Germany, Japan,¹⁹ the United Kingdom, and the United States have all articulated strategic approaches to the Indo-Pacific region predicated on Western state alignment and security cooperation through institutions such as AUKUS and the Quad.²⁰ These Western states have rationalized their strategic approaches to Asia as necessary to ensure a regional rules-based order, ostensibly one dependent on Western leadership, security cooperation, and regional intervention.²¹

Canadian policy writers almost uniformly assume that the country would benefit from closer cooperation and coordination with Western states in Asia, since Canada intrinsically shares these states' values (more on this below) and interests.²² Western states, the reasoning goes, are better stewards of regional institutions such as human rights regimes, international rule of law, maritime security, and Asia's political economy than non-Western, illiberal states. For Canada, Western state alignment in the Indo-Pacific is therefore a clear "win" with respect to the country's regional positioning and its values-based foreign policy.²³

As with Canada's relations with the United States, however, critical analysis of Asian narratives on Western state involvement in Asia suggests that the reality on the ground is more complicated. Within Asian discourse, for instance, one finds almost no demand signals for Western state involvement and/or leadership in or over the region's order. Neither does one find much reference in regional leadership statements, academic writing, media, or public polling that suggests Asian states and peoples share Western critiques of the region's order. Rather, one finds a well-developed body of literature among Asian commentators from Northeast and Southeast Asia identifying Western state (particularly US) involvement in Asia as a source of instability and ongoing conflict.²⁴ Even within Japanese and South Korean polling and writing, one finds deep skepticism over Western states' engagement in Asia and over Western concepts including the "Indo-Pacific" and "rules-based order." There is simply no regional evidence that Asian states are clamouring for Western leadership, or that they view Western states' relatively recent interest in Asia's order as a net-positive development for the region. The presumption that Canada would benefit

from alignment with Western states in Asia is simply incorrect and easily dispelled through a critical analysis of Asian narratives.

Rather than prioritize Western state alignment, therefore, Canada should prioritize engagement with all Asian states that are interested in working toward a stable, inclusive, and cooperative Asian region. Rather than submit each bilateral relationship, each international institution, and each engagement to a “like-minded state” litmus test, Canadian policy-makers should pursue a policy of *omnidirectional diplomacy* and *strategic integration*, or the purposeful engagement with a myriad of Western and Asian states to ensure Canadian strategic, operational, and tactical cooperation throughout the region. Deep integration in multiple regional institutions, not ideological alignment with its Western partners, better serves Canada’s national interests in Asia.

For many Canadian readers, the idea of a value-free foreign policy is anathema to how they view Canada’s position in Asia and within the broader global community. The idea that the “world needs more Canada” has become central to how Canadians think about their country in general and their political and cultural values in particular.²⁵ Indeed, many Canadians are prepared to forgo deeper ties with states like China on the grounds that its government rejects Western concepts of human rights and governance. This leads to the third point of contention simmering within the larger debate over Canada’s approach to Asia: the role of values in state relations.

For many Canadian policy-makers, there is a clear desire to align the country’s foreign policy – or aspects of its policy – with other Western states, those that ostensibly share its values with respect to individual rights, state/society relations, and international law. There is a strong pull, then, from states like Australia and Japan that have integrated the idea of the like-minded state in their foreign and strategic policies so as to appeal, on a normative basis, to other Western democracies, like Canada, for cooperation and coordination.²⁶

Inherently, this appeal to shared values offers a clear contrast with states like China that have different value systems – or lack values, as many Western analysts wrongly suggest – and are therefore deemed outsiders (at best) or disrupters (more commonly) to Asia’s regional order. This appeal to common values, to like-mindedness, also provides Canada an opportunity to develop closer ties with Western states and institutions (as outlined above) and a clear rationale for selling its foreign policy approach to an increasingly skeptical Canadian public.²⁷

Notably, the appeal for ideological alignment with like-minded states, particularly the United States, is especially pervasive in the Canadian policy and academic communities with respect to the country's China policy. One sees this most clearly in media opinion pieces on Canada-China relations, particularly in the *Globe and Mail*, Canada's most prestigious national media publication. Since early 2019, in particular, the *Globe* has published almost daily op-eds from Canada's most reliably anti-China commentators, contributing, at least in part, to a national conversation on China heavily biased against engagement.²⁸ The corollary to this position is the need for greater alignment with the United States, which, at least from the perspective of some of the paper's contributing authors, shares Canada's commitment to liberal norms.

It is not certain, however, that Canadian normative alignment with like-minded states is necessarily desirable, or even, ironically, ethical. Indeed, the idea of a coalition of liberal states – whether formal or informal – as a counterbalance to Asia's changing order is inherently chauvinistic, both with respect to the diversity of ideals and inclusivity of nation-states. At a time when democracy in Asia is in decline and when democratic states around the world have come under scrutiny for their widespread failures to arrest the spread of COVID-19 within their respective societies, the idea that Canada would predicate its approach to Asia on shared ideological alignment is both normatively arrogant and strategically inept.²⁹

Neither is it certain that states such as India, Japan, and/or the United States do, in fact, share Canadian values, particularly with respect to state/society relations, democratic elections and accountability, economic governance, or “inclusivity toward immigrants and non-ethnic-majority citizens.”³⁰ The United States under the Trump administration, in particular, demonstrated a very illiberal approach to foreign policy – supported by nearly half of Americans – that Ottawa would be foolish to support and should be loath to emulate.

Neither is it true that Asian states operate without foreign policy values, or that their different systems make them any less committed to Asia's regional institutions or stability.³¹ China's foreign policy behaviour is directly correlated with the priorities it sets around domestic political stability, state/society relations, and national sovereignty for instance.³² On the whole, therefore, Beijing prioritizes stability in its state relations in Asia, a prioritization that Asian states (as well as

Canadians) well understand and largely appreciate. Indeed, while Asian states clearly remain wary of China's influence, the old trope that these same states fear China and seek partnership with the United States to balance China is less true now than before.³³ States such as Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, and Vietnam, for example, have all demonstrated a keen ability to negotiate with China in ways that advance their own national interests and their national understanding of Asia's strategic environment, even on sensitive matters such as maritime disputes, while states such as Cambodia, Laos, and Myanmar have deepened their economic and political relations with China willingly, not as a result of coercion.³⁴

Should Canada ultimately decide to align with its "like-minded partners," it will find itself squarely in the club of former colonial powers that are rejecting endogenous change in Asia and states that see China's "rise" (another unhelpful, outdated trope) as a security challenge rather than an opportunity for greater Asian integration and state-level cooperation.³⁵ Already an "outside" actor in Asia, Canada could find its opportunities for engagement further limited if regional actors see it – rightly or wrongly – as part of a Western coalition of states intent on arresting regional development for the sake of its continued predominance.

Omnidirectional Diplomacy and Strategic Integration

For Canada, conceptualizing and operationalizing a successful strategy toward Asia means navigating these competing narratives and dynamics to the extent that it can maximize its national interests in the region. As argued throughout this book, Canada cannot achieve this outcome through uncritical alignment with its traditional Western partners, as Western narratives toward Asia are largely biased and at times chauvinistic. Views from Brussels, Canberra, London, Paris, and Washington, far from representing regional dynamics and respecting regional developments, are too often grounded in Western-centric, neocolonial visions of global order and Western leadership and cannot offer Canada a sustainable, inclusive framework on which to build its own national strategy toward Asia. Rather, Ottawa must critically evaluate regional narratives on Asian order to find the correct path for Canada to follow. Through this approach, Canada can effect a strategic policy of omnidirectional diplomacy, avoiding ideological alignment for the sake of informed, non-ideologically based engagement.

Concurrently, Canada must seek concrete opportunities to work with regional actors and within regional networks to establish tangible relations with Asian states and actors and to advance its national interests and values through dialogue and cooperation. Central to this proposition is the need to understand more fully Asia's institutional architecture, primarily those ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) and non-ASEAN institutions that enable Canada to work on issues of national priority. Through this policy of strategic integration, Canada can best position itself for non-ideological engagement, thereby raising its influence throughout the Asia-Pacific on issues of ideological importance to the Canadian people, such as human rights, climate change, and gender equality.

On Omnidirectional Diplomacy

There are many reasons why Canada would align its policy with that of Western states in Asia. In addition to Canada's having shared values with states like Australia and France, as well as shared interests with the European Union and the United States, these Western actors have all articulated a strategic approach to Asia, or the Indo-Pacific, based on these values and interests that Ottawa could adopt and implement with little effort. For Canadian policy-makers and strategic analysts, the common appeal from Western states to support the "rules-based order" is attractive as it reinforces their perception of Canada as a liberal state committed to international rule and international order and provides them with a means to amplify Canada's agency and voice on international issues. Further, the appeal among Canadian policy-makers in particular for conceptual and operational alignment toward Asia will grow as more and more Western states coordinate their activities through Western-oriented institutions such as the G7, NATO, AUKUS, and the Quad, and Western narratives toward Asia increasingly cast the region's order as being under threat from authoritarianism.

The pressure for Western alignment will increase even more as the Canadian public's views on the region harden, particularly with respect to Canada-China relations. Recent polls from the Asia Pacific Foundation of Canada suggest, for instance, that the Canadian public holds Beijing with as little regard as they do North Korea, and that they prefer that their government representatives deprioritize China's interests and reprioritize Canada's values when approaching Asia.³⁶

Within Canada, there is a further predilection for cooperation with like-minded states, or Western state actors.

While the Trump administration's "America First" policy had the effect in Canada of raising questions among government officials and scholars over whether Canada and the United States are indeed like-minded with respect to their national and foreign policy values, the necessity for Canadian policy analysts to question Canada's relations with its most important Western partner quickly dissipated under the Biden administration. Indeed, calls within Canada for alignment with the Biden administration toward China have actually arisen as President Biden has used international forums to frame China as the West's predominant, if not existential, challenge and to call for Western states to align against Beijing around their shared values and US leadership.

Suffice it to say that Canada's natural inclination will continue to be alignment with Western states in its approach to Asia, particularly with the United States on matters related to governance, security, and human rights. As this book will demonstrate, however, wholesale Canadian alignment with the United States, or with any coalition of Western states, will come with significant costs as Western narratives and strategic assumptions toward Asia are not representative of regional views, and any state that fails to take regional perspectives into consideration will inevitably find regional states and institutions less interested in engagement.

To avoid a scenario where Canada's national interests are harmed through overreliance on Western states' approaches to Asia, Ottawa must critically examine its assumptions toward the region with the intent of decoding regional signals on issues of strategic importance. The critical evaluation of Western narratives on Asia is the necessary starting point, as many of the assumptions informing Western views of Asia do not stand up to scrutiny when held against regional dialogue, perceptions, or values. Concurrently, Canadian policy-makers and analysts must spend the time and effort to understand regional narratives regarding Asia's strategic environment. Doing so will enable Ottawa to approach the region from an analytical and conceptual position of strength, not from one based on chauvinistic, antiquated views of Western hegemony and Asian state subordination.

The end state of this approach is not complete strategic decoupling from Western states, particularly the United States. Canada's strategic interests are too intertwined with those of the United States for us to

realistically expect it to ignore Washington's policy dialogues and processes for the sake of an entirely autonomous approach to Asia. Ottawa will always need to take US perspectives into account in its own policy deliberations, if for no reason other than the United States' geographic proximity and its direct impact on Canadian national interests through its proximity and power. Canada will also always find partnership in Western institutions such as the G7 and NATO to be force multipliers enabling it to exercise global agency disproportionate to its actual material and ideological strengths. Further, Canada is a quintessential Western state in its identity, governance, and values and will always seek to lead in these areas where it can – and rightfully so.

Canada should, rather, seek to establish equidistance between its natural Western orientation and the realities within the Asian region, particularly when such equidistance provides it greater opportunities to engage on issues such as human rights, gender equality, and climate change that are so central to its own priorities. Canada need not compromise its own values to do so. Indeed, in approaching the region through a position of humility and compromise, Canada can demonstrate to Asian states – including China – that it is committed to inclusivity and consultation.

What does a policy of omnidirectional diplomacy look like in practice? First, it requires a basis of strategic non-alignment, particularly around Western concepts such as the Indo-Pacific, which have become increasingly aligned with Western hegemonic ideals such as order preservation, Western leadership, and Western-directed security partnerships. Regional states are rightfully wary of these concepts, seeing the Indo-Pacific concept in largely confrontational, anti-Chinese terms. Canada should avoid aligning its foreign and security policies toward Asia with these Indo-Pacific strategies, particularly as they remain controversial throughout the region.

Second, Canada must work to understand and internalize regional perceptions of Asia's strategic environment, especially when these perceptions challenge Canada's assumptions toward the region. This book will identify many such instances and can therefore serve as a starting point for critical analysis of Canada's foreign policy approach to Asia. It alone cannot, however, serve as a strategic master plan toward the region. Rather, Canadian policy-makers must allocate resources to understand and respond better to Asia's changing environment and remain adaptive to shifts in regional perspectives and

priorities, realizing all the while that regional dynamics shift as states' interests evolve.

Third, Canada must use this knowledge of regional dynamics to formulate tactical and operational relations in Asia that best enable it to advance its national interests in the region. This process is best understood as strategic integration, and it is to this point that we now turn.

On Strategic Integration

Within Asian narratives on regional state engagement and economic development, one of the most frequently recurring themes is "interconnectivity." Whether one examines China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), South Korea's New Southern Policy, or ASEAN's Economic Community, one sees repeated reference to interconnectivity as the primary means to strength ties between Asian actors and to establish further a community of Asian nations. Materially, Asian states and state actors establish interconnectivity through transnational infrastructure projects, cross-border special economic zones, and regionally based supply chains. Ideationally, these same states facilitate interconnectivity through free trade agreements, regionally agreed-upon standards and regulations, regional dialogue mechanisms, and socio-cultural exchange. Whereas Western narratives on Asia are predicated on the idea the region's order is under strain from illiberal (read Chinese) sources, Asian narratives on Asian order instead describe a growing web of state and substate relations that constitute a regional ecosystem of networks and relations.

Interconnectivity, in this sense, is both a means to achieve Asian state cooperation and a strategic end state in that it provides a mechanism for the movement of Asian people, goods, and ideas. Across the region, Asian states are establishing new institutions designed to hasten this integration. These institutions are not, as Western narratives suggest, a source of regional instability. They are, rather, mechanisms designed by Asian actors to represent Asian interests within the Asian region.

For Canada, these institutions offer the most direct means of tactical and operational engagement in Asia. At the strategic level, they provide Canadian policy-makers and analysts with a venue for engagement and dialogue on issues of regional importance. At the working group level, they provide with Canada access to outcome-driven engagement on issues ranging from human rights to governance, from

sustainable development to nuclear non-proliferation. More than any other means, these institutions provide Canada with a map of regional networks and ties through which it can work to engage.

Canadian policy-makers' priorities toward these networks should be non-ideological, non-restrictive engagement, or what this book calls "strategic integration." Whether with respect to the ASEAN + mechanisms or the Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia (CICA), the Canadian government should actively seek strategic-level representation in Asia's predominant institutions and tactical-level cooperation in the institutions' working and expert groups. As Asia's new institutions are increasingly one-stop shops for dialogue and work covering politics, economics, security, environment, and social engagement, Canada should be non-discerning with regard to an institution's ideological orientation, its membership, or its leadership, but should rather seek to engage with each institution on the conceptual grounds that Canada's interests in Asia are best served through dialogue and representation.

Equally, Canadian policy-makers should approach institutional engagement in Asia with the understanding that Canada's ability to influence regional discourse on issues the Canadian public prioritizes in its foreign relations, such as human rights and climate change, is dramatically expanded through non-paternalistic engagement. Rather than work with like-minded states to arrest Asia's institutional development, Canada can work with regional states, actors, and institutions to raise its values at the dialogue and working levels.

In addition to greater influence, a strategic integration approach to Asia's institutions and networks provides Canada with greater strategic flexibility in the region. Integration is not a dogmatic strategic ideal – unlike the Western "free" and "open" Indo-Pacific strategies – but rather one that prioritizes strategic engagement for tactical-level outcomes. Whereas Ottawa would necessarily lose the ability to engage with Asian states and Asian actors through alignment with the United States, for instance, a strategic integration approach would enable Canada to prioritize issue areas, relations, and networks depending on its national interests and its resources. If Canada decides human rights is its most important priority in Asia, for instance, it can work within Asian institutions and networks that address the issue, simultaneously learning from and influencing Asian discourse. Similarly, if Canada wants greater input on issues around a code of conduct for the South

China Sea, it can work with regional states to raise its concerns and viewpoints.

Importantly, strategic integration directly supports (and is dependent on) omnidirectional diplomacy. Canada is already integrated in Western-oriented institutions that are active, or are trying to become active, in the Asia-Pacific including the G7, the Five Eyes intelligence alliance, and NATO. Canadian policy-makers are further considering Canadian involvement in new Western-centric institutions such as AUKUS and the Quad. Canadian involvement in Asia's regional institutions, particularly ASEAN's working groups and non-ASEAN institutions such as the Lancang-Mekong Cooperation (LMC) forum and the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC), would provide counterbalance to its membership in Western institutions and increase its legitimacy as an independent strategic actor in the region. Far from diluting its existing relations with Western states and institutions, strategic integration in Asia would likely increase Canada's influence as it would enable Ottawa to "translate" Asian narratives for its Western partners.

Toward a More Informed Canadian Foreign Policy Approach to Asia

This book employs critical theory to examine and to critique the predominant Western narratives on Asia with the intent of informing a Canadian policy of omnidirectional diplomacy and strategic integration toward the region. Methodologically, the book examines scholarship, leadership statements, polling, and media from Northeast Asia (Japan, South Korea), Southeast Asia (Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, and Vietnam), and China to challenge Western narratives' predominant themes and assumptions and to provide alternative regional views. On issues ranging from the Indo-Pacific construct to Asia's "rules-based order," it undertakes textual analysis in Japanese, Korea, Indonesian, Malay, Thai, and Vietnamese to demonstrate Western discourses' misunderstanding of regional developments and to outline alternative, regionally based views of Asia's contemporary dynamics. It further details Mandarin-language scholarship, media, leadership statements, and polling to offer a counter-narrative to Western narratives on China's identity, its intentions, its institutions, and its state/society relations.³⁷ To ensure as accurate an account of Asia's counter-narrative as possible, it identifies scholarship and writing as part of each country's

collective “mainstream” media even when such narratives constitute outsider perspectives vis-à-vis more dominant narrative strands. Identifying Japanese literature critical of the US-Japan security alliance, for instance, I took pains to review work from reputable publications and established, non-fringe authors.

Chapter 1 lays out the book’s central argument, which is the idea that Western narratives on Asia are more representative of Western self-perceptions, Western beliefs, and Western-shared ideals than they are of regional realities. The chapter introduces concepts drawn from critical theory, critical security studies, and post-colonial literature, such as cultural hegemony and hegemonic socialization, to argue that Western narratives on Asia are a product of US hegemony, up to and including ideas around the region’s international relations, Asia’s rules-based order, the like-minded state trope, and the “free” and “open” concepts.

To elaborate this point further, **Chapter 2** outlines narratives from Japan, South Korea, Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand, and Vietnam on the Indo-Pacific as a geographic area and its conceptual foundations. Through close textual analysis, it demonstrates how Western assumptions around the Indo-Pacific are largely discordant with Asian thinking on the topic, including in Western-aligned states such as Japan.

Chapter 3 also employs non-English-language textual analysis to consider regional narratives on Western state involvement in Asia. Specifically, it examines how regional states view the United States, Europe and European states, Australia, Japan, and India as regional actors. It demonstrates that Asian narratives on US leadership and Western state involvement in Asia differ from Western discourse, which sees Western state leadership and involvement in Asia as a net positive for the region’s stability. **Chapter 3** also shows how the views of regional states toward Australia, Japan, and India diverge from the Western assumption that the three states are representative Asian actors and/or Western like-minded states.

Chapter 4 also explores regional narratives on three of Asia’s predominant security issues: maritime security in the South China Sea, nuclear security on the Korean peninsula, and China-Taiwan security relations. It challenges Western assumptions about Asia’s security regimes and the stabilizing effect Western states have on the region’s security order. It demonstrates, for example, that the United States’ predilection for Western security cooperation through institutions such as AUKUS are problematic as they totally ignore regional discourse

that treats Western intervention in Asia as a source of *instability* rather than stability.

Moving from Asian narratives, [Chapter 5](#) examines Mandarin-language writing and polling on China's predominant domestic and foreign issues, including Chinese domestic support for the Chinese Communist Party and the country's foreign policy motivations. It also outlines Chinese perspectives on issues central to Canada-China relations, such as the situation in the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region (XUAR), China-Taiwan relations, and governance in Hong Kong.

[Chapter 6](#) builds on the previous chapters' analysis to undertake a brief network analysis of Canada's involvement in the Asia-Pacific's primary endogenous institutions and to identify further opportunities for Canadian engagement in the region's institutional networks. It outlines a networked approach for deeper Canadian engagement in the Asia-Pacific, setting the conceptual ground for the concluding chapter, which articulates a Canadian strategic approach to the region predicated on omnidirectional diplomacy and strategic integration.

1

The Basics

A Critical Examination of Western Narratives on Asia

Narratives are a foundational component of international relations, although scholars spend a surprisingly small amount of time considering their influence over global and regional systems and affairs. In addition to providing ideational frameworks for debate, narratives inform such intangibles as a state's identity, its national interests, its relations with its own society, and its ties with the rest of the world.¹ Narratives determine the language policy-makers and scholars use to articulate their state's priorities and values, thereby influencing the policies and analysis that result. They are the most basic component of how states view the world, determining, in the process, the nature of the international system.²

Narratives have the reiterative quality of both responding to and informing how states and state actors view their place in international society.³ Canadian policy-makers, for instance, operate reactively to reinforce positive international narratives about Canada's national identity and proactively to advance Canada's narrative of its own foreign policy priorities and values. While having the positive effect of enabling states to engage, narratives can have the negative effect of reducing a state's perceived options regarding a specific issue area, within a specific institution, and toward a specific state. Narratives can also have the reductive quality of limiting a state's ability to maneuver in a dynamic environment, as they tend to evolve slowly and

over time rather than in response to dramatic shifts in state relations and power dynamics.

Importantly, narratives are not neutral, as most of those who operate within their confines presume, but are the product of power dynamics.⁴ Just as history is written by the victors, so dominant powers have a disproportionate influence over the formation and propagation of narratives. This effect is particularly pronounced when the dominant state operates not only through bilateral relations but also through multi-lateral institutions where appeals to common ideology, interests, and values are integral to an institution's structure and governance systems.⁵ Antonio Gramsci described this process in his writing on cultural hegemony. G. John Ikenberry and Charles A. Kupchan expanded the concept to international relations in their writing on hegemonic socialization. Both of these concepts are addressed in more detail below.

Narratives are inherently value-laden, both responding to and reinforcing specific ideologies.⁶ During the Cold War, for instance, concepts including historical materialism informed communist narratives on economics, politics, and security.⁷ In contemporary Asia, the Democratic People's Republic of Korea (DPRK) relies on values around national struggle and self-reliance (*juche*) to inform narratives of legitimacy around North Korea's power structure.⁸ Similarly, values of "freedom" and "independence" are central to US narratives around American exceptionalism.⁹ These are, of course, only three well-known examples of the interplay between narratives and values that can be observed in national discourses throughout recorded history.¹⁰

Narratives are also fundamentally a collection of assumptions, not facts.¹¹ In this respect, they are closer to dogmas than to academic disciplines.¹² Quite often, narratives depend on their adherents' unquestioning loyalty for their survival, and wither under critical scrutiny. To prevent such scrutiny, narratives tend to include well-developed defence mechanisms. Those brave (or foolish) enough to question a narrative's validity, for example, often find themselves excommunicated, branded as traitors to the cause.

For Canada, the need to understand the role of narratives in Asian affairs is practical, not academic. As outlined in this book's introduction, policy-makers are disadvantaged by overreliance on Western narratives in formulating Canada's national approach to Asia, as Western narratives are largely based on assumptions around regional dynamics that do not correspond with reality. Whether having to do

with concepts such as international law, the rules-based order, or the like-minded state, much of the Western narrative around Asia, as demonstrated throughout this book, is a function of Western self-referential identity, not regional perceptions.

US narratives, in particular, have become predominant to the extent that they now shape how other Western nations conceptualize the Asian region, primarily by setting narrative signs and signals through discourse on the region's dynamics. Canadian policy analysts too often accept these narrative indicators as a fixed sign of Asia's actual strategic realities, not, as they actually are, as reflections of US priorities and interests in the region.

Much of this book is dedicated to examining the assumptions within Western meta-narratives on Asia, specifically the contentions within Western discourse regarding the "Indo-Pacific," Western leadership, regional security, and China. Notably, to undertake an analytical exercise of this scope, it is sometimes necessary to employ simple analytical models in lieu of innately complicated constructs. Throughout this book, therefore, I will repeatedly reference Western, Canadian, and Asian narratives to describe discourses and perspectives across diverse peoples, states, and regions. In so doing, I knowingly reduce what are at times complicated narrative tributaries into common narrative streams.

Importantly, the use of these generic categories to inform my analytical approach is not meant to deny the richness of their component parts. There are, of course, divergent viewpoints and values across the Western world, within the Asian region, and across Canada. That said, it is this book's central premise that narratives are defining features of the international system that facilitate processes such as foreign and defence policy and inform regimes such as alliance relations and security communities. From this perspective, it is both necessary and appropriate to employ generalized classification systems to describe narrative alignment within and between states, particularly with respect to shared narratives that seek to define the nature of international order and to determine the legitimacy or illegitimacy of international actors.

Toward this end, we turn now to an outline of the conceptual approach employed in this book, addressing Western assumptions about Asia's international relations, Asia's "rules-based order," Asian institutions, international law, and like-minded states in the process.

Critical Theory as a Conceptual Framework

To build a “theory of the case” for how Canadian foreign policy toward Asia is hamstrung by policy-makers’ overreliance on Western narratives, this book draws heavily from a body of literature known as critical theory. A relatively overlooked and often esoteric subfield within international relations theory, critical theory is primarily concerned with power dynamics between oppressors and the oppressed. For critical theory pioneers such as Antonio Gramsci, the world is divided between hegemonic powers and those states subordinate to the hegemonic system.¹³ One can best understand all state relations, and international systems, therefore, as a function of inequality and exploitation.

Critical theorists draw heavily from Marxist and post-colonial writing to identify and explain how hegemonic actors use narratives, or social tools such as institutions, to shape the systems they control in order to ensure an unfair playing field, one in which they are better able to secure their predominance and propagate their interests.¹⁴ For critical theorists, international society is fundamentally a rigged system designed to give states and state actors the perception that they have agency while systematically limiting their ability to take real independent action.¹⁵

These dynamics have necessarily produced winners and losers and, more importantly, promote the winners’ interests through the propagation of their values and ideals. From a critical theorist’s perspective, international institutions are tools of oppression as much as they are a component of global governance.¹⁶ Similarly, universal values are a hegemonic means of social and cultural subjugation, not, as the system’s dominant powers would have all states believe, an appeal to a common humanity.

Within the critical theorist’s world view, narratives play a central role in propagating hegemonic control over subordinate states. Narratives enable dominant states to selectively build a normative rationale for their behaviour and an ideational framework for critique of other states.¹⁷ Through narrative formation and control, hegemonic powers can determine, for instance, which states are “insiders” and which are “outsiders.” In more extreme cases, hegemonic powers use narratives to justify interventions, conflicts, and war.¹⁸ The American Cold War-era “domino theory” is an excellent example of a hegemonic narrative used to justify US military intervention in the Korean

Peninsula and Indochina, among other contingencies, all under the logic of containment.¹⁹

Critical theorists also argue that hegemonic powers use narratives to effect control over their partner states, primarily through a process Gramsci called “cultural hegemony,” Ikenberry and Kupchan termed “hegemonic socialization,” and Michel Foucault labelled “discursive power.”²⁰ Through their dominance of international society’s primary mechanisms (institutions, dialogues, regimes), hegemonic states advance their narratives and compel secondary states to adopt them. Secondary states either voluntarily or reluctantly internalize the hegemon’s narratives as doing so increases their prestige and influence within the hegemonic system.²¹ Once established, the hegemonic narrative “ecosystem” has a self-perpetuating quality. States with shared narratives validate one another and strengthen their narrative alignment accordingly.²²

Narrative alignment, in turn, becomes an ideological litmus test for the hegemon’s partners, or what analysts now refer to as “like-minded states.” Those that share the hegemonic state’s values and beliefs have access to its resources, networks, and support. Those that do not run the risk of becoming a target for hegemon-led collective action, with their beliefs, systems, relations, and ties cast as inherently “illegitimate” or, with respect to the Asia-Pacific, “illiberal.”

From this book’s perspective, critical theory provides an important conceptual means to evaluate contemporary Western narratives on Asia. Viewing them through the lens of hegemony, power dynamics, and cultural hegemony, one can see how Western narratives around the Indo-Pacific, for instance, are less about advancing Asian states’ interests and/or perspectives than they are about ensuring Western (primarily American) hegemony and military predominance over the Asian region. Western narratives on China and Asian security, further, are more concerned with justifying Western predominance in Asia than they are with accurately reflecting regional realities, representing regional perspectives, or ensuring regional stability.

Similarly, Western narratives on Western leadership almost entirely discount Asian states’ agency and misrepresent the structure of Asian order to legitimize Western intervention in the region. Each of these areas is addressed in detail in subsequent chapters.

Critical theory’s understanding of cultural hegemony, hegemonic socialization, and discursive power is also fundamental to this book’s

argument that the overdependence of Canadian policy-makers and analysts on Western narratives for their Asian policy development is a source of strategic vulnerability. Specifically, critical theory suggests that Ottawa's propensity to approach Asia through a Western analytical lens is not the result of thoughtful analysis over the best way to achieve Canada's national interests, but rather a function of US hegemony and Canada's place within the existing hegemonic system. Canadian policy-makers and policy analysts who uncritically employ terms like "Indo-Pacific," "rules-based order," or "like-minded states" to describe Canada's approach to Asia are propagating an externally constructed set of assumptions, not articulating a well-crafted national strategy for Canadian regional engagement. That these assumptions do not represent Asian narratives and priorities is particularly problematic for Canada as its policy-makers risk leaving the country isolated in the region if they uncritically internalize the assumptions as their own.

Finally, critical theory provides a starting point for the construction of an alternative narrative on Asia, one structured around regional discourse, perceptions, and priorities rather than Western assumptions. Critical theory's core tenet that hegemonic narratives are power constructs, not accurate descriptions of regional power dynamics, naturally lends itself to closer consideration of regional conditions and dialogues. In rejecting Western claims that Asia is moving toward an Indo-Pacific geographic construct, for instance, a critical theory approach necessarily identifies trends that support an alternative viewpoint – in this case, that the Asian region is becoming more inwardly focused through physical and ideational interconnectivity. The development of a counter-narrative is critical for Canadian policy-makers as it provides the basis for omnidirectional diplomacy and a strategic integration approach to Asia, one based on inclusive engagement, not ideological alignment.

The rest of this chapter employs critical theory to critique dominant Western meta-narratives around Asia's international relations, the rules-based order in Asia, international institutions, internal law, and the like-minded-state trope. The aim is to elaborate further on critical theory's core tenets while demonstrating its value as an analytical framework. To provide the most comprehensive critique possible of Western narratives on Asia, we go back to the very beginning – Western writing on Asia's international relations.

Critical Theory and Asia's International Relations

Within critical theory there are two main critiques of Western narratives on Asia's international relations. The first focuses on the tendency of Western scholars to employ Western standards to evaluate Asia's regional dynamics and experiences, and to assume that Western models of international relations are universal in their applicability to Asia.²³ Critiquing international relations (IR) theory in general, critical theorists argue that realism, liberalism, and constructivism are too Western-centric in their theorizing and biased in their analysis – a process that results in consistent misreading of regional affairs and under-theorization of regional international relations.²⁴ Western analysis on Asia often relies on Western historical experiences as conceptual baselines and analytical starting points, meaning that much of Asia's experience is treated as an adjunct to Western imperialism and colonialism, not as a unique set of relations and institutions that merit their own field of inquiry.²⁵

Conceptually, Western-centric approaches to Asia's international relations too often result in a view of the region as institutionally underdeveloped and politically immature, two viewpoints that informed colonial-era rationales for Western intervention and involvement in the region.²⁶ By applying Western concepts such as sovereignty to Asia's political regimes, for example, Western scholars have argued that the concept of statehood was underdeveloped in Asia, thereby suggesting the region lagged behind Europe, in particular, in terms of its political sophistication.²⁷ Central to this perspective is the belief among past scholars, in particular, that the West had a responsibility to “educate” Asia's political elites on modernity, a belief that informed racist ideals, including the “white man's burden” in Asia.²⁸ In its most virulent form, Western actors employed these narratives to justify “nation building” in Asia or to countenance Western intervention in Asian states' political affairs, a process most recently observed in Afghanistan.

Western-centric IR theories also employ Western paradigms to critique Asia's political regimes, economic institutions, and state/society relations, measuring their “legitimacy” against Western liberalism.²⁹ Western IR scholars' critiques of the Chinese Communist Party, for instance, tend to focus not on its effectiveness at governing but rather on its lack of political transparency, representation, or accountability – all Western standards for good government.³⁰ Western critiques of the

Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) also tend to use Western models, particularly the European Union, as global standards against which they judge ASEAN's "effectiveness" and/or "success." Western narratives further suggest that economic liberalism and democracy remain the standards against which Asian states' "openness" and "freedom" must be measured.³¹ In each instance, the presumption of Western institutions as the global standard dismisses Asia's regional experiences, histories, and innovations.³²

As demonstrated throughout this book, these ideational Western assumptions regarding Asia's institutions have real-world strategic outcomes for the region, and indeed for Canada's foreign policy toward Asia. The view that Asia is a dependent region within the broader Western-dominated global system, one that requires Western leadership, informs Western strategies on the Indo-Pacific, for instance, in ways that will almost certainly lead to future instability (more on this later). Similarly, the Western proclivity to judge Asia's internal institutions against Western standards creates a paradigm across the Western world that non-democratic states are somehow simply out of equilibrium rather than operating in line with their own internal political traditions.³³ Western ideas around economic "openness" and political "freedom" similarly inform a sense of hubris across Western states leading to the view that an Asian region moving away from these values is one in need of Western leadership and guidance.

Critical theory's second critique of Western IR scholarship on Asia is its lack of inclusivity, equality, and representation from Asian scholars and scholars from the Global South.³⁴ First, critical theorists argue that Western scholars largely discount Asian viewpoints on Asia's international relations, seeing them as somehow irrelevant to the larger field of international relations, which is primarily theorized around Western experiences.³⁵ Rather, Western scholars largely ignore regional debates on Asia's past and present experiences, seeing these as little more than outliers to the more established Western system of international relations.³⁶

One sees this most clearly with respect to China, where Western scholars overlook the country's rich, unbroken discourse on state/society relations, governance, and international relations only to critique the country in line with Western standards, such as representative democracy. Similarly, Western scholars' near-universal rejection

of regional voices on Asia's predominant security regimes – whether the South China Sea, North Korea, or Taiwan – results in a similar biased view of the region's strategic environment. As Western states are more and more willing to tie their own legitimacy in Asia to their support for outcomes that fit their world view of Asia's order, not the ideas regarding order one finds in regional discussions, the dependence on Western narratives once again raises the prospect of regional instability.

Second, critical theorists argue that non-Western voices are structurally underrepresented in IR scholarship as the ability to write and to publish effectively in English has become a structural prerequisite for engagement.³⁷ The field's most prominent journals and university presses publish almost exclusively in English, all but ensuring that scholars from North America and Europe dominate IR-related discourse. Western scholars then cite these English articles, books, and journals almost exclusively, leading to an echo chamber of analytical debate that is functionally exclusive. Further, Western editors are largely dismissive of those untrained in Western methodologies regarding international relations, an editorial development that has moved IR scholarship markedly toward a US system that privileges quantitative over qualitative analysis. For those more interested in approaching international relations through a humanities lens, particularly those unable to publish in English, there is less and less opportunity for publication. Emanuel Adler and Steven Bernstein label this process “epistemic colonialism.”³⁸

Again, there are real-world consequences to these outcomes. Western scholars, particularly non-area specialists, who rely on English-language literature to frame their understanding of Asia are necessarily engaging with only a fraction of available scholarship – *a fraction that is exclusively informed by Western narratives and assumptions*. This suggests that even the most conscientious scholars working exclusively in English will find their understanding of alternative viewpoints artificially limited. For policy analysts, the implications are even greater. Rather than presenting a balanced, informed account of ideas, dialogues, and debates to a policy community charged with shaping the state's regional approaches, those working only in English and with English-speaking counterparts will instead present a skewed perspective as a matter of course.

Critical Theory and the “Rules-Based Order”

Within the broader Western narrative on Asia’s international relations, the concept of the rules-based order (RBO) in Asia has emerged as a predominant theme. Across Western academic and policy writing, the concept now appears with such frequency that Western analysts uncritically assume its form and function and reference it in their writing as if it were a fixed, observable, and uncontroversial constant within the international system.³⁹ More specifically, and relevant to discussions of Canada’s foreign policy approach toward Asia, the Biden administration now references RBO “preservation” as a key driver behind its Indo-Pacific strategy and its approach to China.⁴⁰ Indeed, RBO “protection” is now central to Western states’ strategic narratives around and policies toward the Asian region, as outlined below. While the next chapter examines Asian perceptions of the rules-based order in detail, this chapter is concerned with a critical analysis of the rules-based order as a Western meta-narrative.

The rules-based order is a nebulous concept, as exemplified in one well-known Western scholar’s observation that defining it is like “wrestling fog.”⁴¹ Conceptually, one can trace its genesis to George Kennan’s early writing on containment, according to Anne-Marie Slaughter, one of the concept’s principal architects.⁴² G. John Ikenberry initially used the term with reference to liberal democratic alignment, Western defence of the “liberal international order,” and Western military preponderance, all with the expressed intent of preventing great power conflict with autocratic states.⁴³ Other scholars have used the term interchangeably with concepts that include US hegemony, US unipolarity, and US global leadership, both positively and negatively.⁴⁴ Still others have defined the rules-based order as a US-provided “public good,” conveniently ignoring the number of times the United States has violated the rules-based order when it has suited its national purpose.⁴⁵

More relevant to this book, Western scholarship on Asia now routinely employs the term “rules-based order” in opposition to China’s “reversionism,” implying that it is under attack while failing to define its exact parameters.⁴⁶ For Western policy analysts, in particular, rules-based order in Asia is as much a rallying cry for Western engagement in Asia as it is a tangible, observable entity.⁴⁷ Indeed, more and more Western scholarship treats the rules-based order as a strategic end state in Asia rather than a functioning regime, one that requires concerted Western partnership to secure.⁴⁸

Operationally, one can trace the rules-based order's first regular appearance in the American political and strategic lexicon to 2003, when US policy-makers and policy analysts used the term to justify the United States' unilateral decision to invade Iraq, despite opposition from the United Nations.⁴⁹ Within Asia, both the Trump and Biden administrations have invoked the rules-based order to legitimize US military operations and partnerships and to rally Western state cooperation in the Indo-Pacific.⁵⁰ President Biden, in particular, has used it to call for Western political and military coordination in Asia and vis-à-vis China with the G7, the European Union, NATO, and the Quad, and with Australia and the United Kingdom through the AUKUS framework in 2021.⁵¹ Within US narratives on Asia, references to the rules-based order are particularly pronounced with respect to US-China competition and the need for the United States to maintain military predominance to defend the rules-based order in Asia against Chinese "revisionism."⁵² The US Department of Defense, for example, identified China's challenge to the Indo-Pacific rules-based order and the need for US-led RBO preservation in Asia as the key strategic objective informing its 2021 Pacific Deterrence Initiative, for which it requested US\$5 billion.⁵³

Outside the United States, one finds repeated reference to RBO preservation as a strategic end state and as an "international public good" in Japan's Free and Open Indo-Pacific concept.⁵⁴ The Abe/Suga/Kishida governments, in particular, referenced RBO preservation to justify closer alliance with the United States on regional security matters, up to and including Japan's support for "peace and stability" in the Taiwan Strait.⁵⁵ The European Union's Indo-Pacific strategy similarly identifies the rules-based order in Asia to countenance a more robust European (and European naval) presence in Asia, all for the sake of regional "stability."⁵⁶ France's Indo-Pacific strategy includes repeated reference to rules-based multilateralism and the rules-based order, as do the Indo-Pacific concepts of the Netherlands and Germany.⁵⁷ Somewhat perversely, both London and Berlin have identified the need for RBO preservation in the Indo-Pacific as justification for their respective naval deployments to Asia, including to highly sensitive areas such as the South China Sea and Taiwan Strait.⁵⁸

Support for the rules-based order in Asia is now arguably Australia's predominant strategic objective in the Asia-Pacific.⁵⁹ Across its Foreign Policy White Papers and throughout Australian academic writing on the region, one finds repeated mention of Australia's need to work

with regional democracies to defend the Indo-Pacific rules-based order.⁶⁰ Notably, Australian policy writers and strategists tend to identify the rules-based order's importance in line with Australia's national interests and democratic values, not with respect to Asia's overall stability and security.⁶¹

Far from a stabilizing regime, critical theorists see the rules-based order as a hegemonic system of oppression designed by predominant powers to ensure their interests vis-à-vis the developing world.⁶² Their cynicism comes, in large part, from the fact that Western states established the rules-based order from a position of power and privilege, not through a process of collaboration and consultation.⁶³ For critical theorists, it is an inherently exclusionary construct, despite Western scholars' claims that states such as China have benefited from the stability it provides. More specifically, critical theorists argue that the rules-based order is a great power means of ensuring an operational space for advancing Western states' economic, diplomatic, and security interests – a space these same states purposefully designed and effectively control.⁶⁴

For critical theorists, the concept of the rules-based order as a fixed entity, particularly when its principal architects use its preservation as a rationale for aggression within the international system, is especially problematic. The United States, in particular, has used perceived threats to the rules-based order as a justification for military action on multiple occasions, the most glaring instance being Iraq, as noted above.⁶⁵ Indeed, the United States has similarly referenced its need to protect the rules-based order with respect to its Iran and North Korea policies, up to and including the threat of military force against both states.⁶⁶ Most relevant for the sake of this book are US references to the rules-based order in Asia being under “attack” from China.⁶⁷

More specifically, critical theory suggests that the rules-based order is a problematic concept on three salient grounds. First, in order to have legitimacy, the rules-based order cannot be a fixed constant, but must have the ability to adapt to the system it supposedly represents in line with natural systemic changes. This would include the ability to adapt to shifts in relative balances of power between states, to divergences between state types, and to changes in states' values, norms, and principles.⁶⁸ Second, critical theorists would reject the premise that the rules-based order can come under attack from any state or coalition of states, as its only “vulnerability” comes from antiquated, unresponsive

mechanisms for change. There is no single, fixed rules-based order, so it is more accurate to view its evolution as a contest of ideas or state influence, both of which require ideational buy-in for legitimation.⁶⁹ Finally, critical theorists reject the idea that any single state, or consortium of states, has the right to “protect” the rules-based order, particularly if the only “threat” to the system comes from alternative institutions, values, and norms.⁷⁰ The rules-based order cannot belong to any single state, short of coercive hegemony, and therefore has value only in its ability to represent all states. US claims that it is protecting the rules-based order through military action, therefore, are not the actions of a benevolent state, but rather a clear example of hegemonic aggression and of the hegemon’s willingness to use force to ensure its predominance within the international system.⁷¹

Other strands of critical theory relevant to analysis of Western narratives on Asia include those concerned with institutions and international law, both of which are central to Western discourse on the rules-based order and Western leadership in Asia. On institutions, for example, critical theorists reject the Western claim that existing global institutions are inclusive and impartial, arguing instead that these institutions are largely skewed in favour of the Western states that established them and consequently resistant to reform.⁷² Rather than evolving in line with Asia’s development and/or demographic trends, these institutions are instead a primary means through which powerful, wealthy states maintain power, often at the expense of weak, developing states.

Closely related to critical theory’s critiques of international institutions are its critiques of international law. As with institutions, critical theory scholars argue that international law is not the result of state consensus, but rather an institution the world’s predominant powers established in line with their own understandings of jurisprudence and their own geopolitical and geo-economic interests.⁷³ International law, in this sense, is not the sacrosanct institution Western analysts often identify as key to a rules based order, but is rather a tool for oppression that the system’s established powers use to ensure their privileged positions within the international community and to prevent rival states from upsetting the international status quo.⁷⁴ From this perspective, international law, rather than being an impartial tool to effect transnational justice, is a hegemonic instrument designed to ensure the established powers’ continued systems-level predominance.⁷⁵

From this perspective, Canadian policy-makers should be wary of the rules-based order as a narrative foundation on which to build a foreign policy approach toward Asia. In addition to its vagueness, the concept remains uniformly Western-centric and does not accurately represent regional trends around order formation, state relations, and strategic priorities. As with the rules-based order, a clearer understanding of the controversies attached to international institutions and law can help inform a more balanced Canadian approach to Asia, particularly as one finds clear skepticism around both concepts within Asian narratives.

Critical Theory and the “Like-Minded State”

Another problematic meta-narrative within Western discourse on Asia is the idea of the like-minded state. Under the Trump administration, the concept emerged as a rallying cry for Western democracies to work together to protect the rules-based order in the Asia-Pacific. Encoded in the United States’ 2017 National Security Strategy, the like-minded state concept built on the Obama administration’s more measured use of the term to call for a US-led coalition of states, organized primarily to push back against Chinese and Russian revisionism.⁷⁶ Conceptually, the Departments of State and Defense furthered the idea of like-minded state cooperation in their respective Indo-Pacific strategies since neither document referenced in the note has the title *Free and Open Indo-Pacific Strategy*?⁷⁷ Operationally, President Trump’s National Security Council identified like-minded coalition building as key to its plan to maintain US pre-eminence in the Indo-Pacific theatre.⁷⁸

In keeping with Trump-era usage, the Biden administration has embraced the like-minded state paradigm; indeed, it has expanded its usage to describe the return of US leadership on issues as diverse as humanitarianism, climate change, alliance relations, and security cooperation in the Asia-Pacific.⁷⁹ As with the Trump administration, the Biden team has similarly identified US like-minded partnership as a cornerstone of its policy to “manage” China.⁸⁰

With such a purposely vague concept, there is no formal constitution of like-minded states in Asia. Indeed, both the Trump and Biden teams have used the concept to call for closer US cooperation with ASEAN member states, many of which neither share US values nor interests toward the region.⁸¹ Part of the US like-minded state paradigm

is therefore aimed at fostering an inclusive community of states to advance US interests in the region.

The larger part of the like-minded state model is, however, closely aligned with a US-centric alliance of Western democracies, all of which share the United States' priorities around preserving the rules-based order in Asia and managing China's regional rise. This reading of the like-minded state construct becomes clear in US statements on AUKUS, the Quad, US Indo-Pacific strategies, US commentary on its alliance relations, and US leadership statements on democratic coalitions.⁸² Functionally, this grouping of like-minded states includes Australia, France, Germany, Japan, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom, all of which have embraced the like-minded state approach as a means to further their own national interests in the Asia-Pacific.

For Australia, for instance, like-minded state cooperation is central to the Morrison government's approach to preserving the "durable strategic balance" in the Indo-Pacific.⁸³ Australian policy-makers and politicians also use the like-minded state model to justify the country's "forever partnership" with the United States and the United Kingdom in the Indo-Pacific through AUKUS.⁸⁴ Similarly, the Abe/Suga/Kishida governments in Japan incorporated the idea of like-minded state cooperation in the country's Free and Open Indo-Pacific vision, and reiterated the importance of like-minded state cooperation as a cornerstone of Japanese security engagement in the Indo-Pacific and with the Quad.⁸⁵

Likewise, the United States' predominant European partner states have adopted the like-minded state paradigm to describe their intentions, approaches, and priorities vis-à-vis the Indo-Pacific theatre. Indeed, whether it be France, Germany, or the Netherlands, all the European states with committed Indo-Pacific strategies have referenced like-minded state cooperation as a critical component.⁸⁶ The United Kingdom, too, has identified its strategic role in the Indo-Pacific as a "convener of likeminded states."⁸⁷ Indeed, whether in Canberra or London, policy-makers now reference a conceptual cohort of like-minded states as critical to their achieving all their strategic ends in Asia, whether defined in terms of preventing climate change or preserving the region's rules-based order.

Critical theory would suggest that there are clear historical overtones to the like-minded state construct in Asia that make it particu-

larly problematic. Whether with respect to colonialism, imperialism, or anti-communism, one finds extensive reference to like-minded state consortiums in Cold War–era accounts of Western state alignment.⁸⁸ Washington, in particular, used “like-mindedness” as a justification for supporting European colonial efforts in Asia, to justify military intervention in Indochina, and to countenance regime change in states such as Indonesia. While Western state cooperation under the like-minded state mantra in Asia today has not yet reached the Cold War–era fever pitch, critical theorists note all current like-minded states are former colonial powers in Asia, at least one of which maintains colonial-era territories (New Caledonia) in the region even today.

In Canada, a growing chorus of policy analysts are calling for conceptual alignment with the United States and other like-minded Western states in Asia.⁸⁹ Central to their logic is the belief that as a Western middle power, Canada can, and should, advanced its national interests through close coordination with Western democracies. In working with like-minded states, the argument goes, Canada can best support the rules-based order in Asia, push back against Chinese aggression throughout the region, and ensure the preservation and/or promotion of democracy within certain Indo-Pacific states.⁹⁰ Further, in working with like-minded states, Canada can best leverage its status as a G7 country in Asia and best position itself to be an active member of any emerging democratic coalition of states.⁹¹

Yet a full embrace of the like-minded state paradigm would be a strategic mistake for Canada, much as it might ultimately prove to be for its most vocal proponents. Far from enabling Canada to work more effectively in the region, prioritizing like-minded state relations over a more diversified strategy based on national security interests will place Canada firmly inside a Western-aligned camp of states, many of which are declining, outside powers and all of which – as noted above – are former colonial states.⁹²

Critical Theory and the “Free” and “Open” Concepts

While there are differences in their respective approaches, Western narratives on the Indo-Pacific have uniformly identified the maintenance of “freedom” and “openness” as a strategic end state within the region. France’s Indo-Pacific strategy, for instance, identifies “free” movement and “free” trade as strategic priorities, while Germany’s Indo-Pacific approach calls for “freedom of opinion and freedom of the press” and

“freedom of religion and belief, religious tolerance and the responsibility of the religions for peace.”⁹³ Japan defines the “free and open Indo-Pacific” as a regional public good, where states have freedom of movement and freedom of navigation and can engage in free trade.⁹⁴ Within Australia’s various policy statements on the Indo-Pacific, one finds regular reference to “open markets facilitat[ing] flows of goods, services, capital and ideas” as a strategic priority, as well as “the right of individuals to practice their religion free from government interference.”⁹⁵

The United States, under both the Trump and Biden administrations, has been more explicit in its articulation of a free and open Indo-Pacific. For instance, the State Department’s 2019 document *A Free and Open Indo-Pacific: Advancing a Shared Vision* defines the United States’ strategic end state in the Indo-Pacific as the “preservation of the free and open regional order,” an order based on “freedom and openness rather than coercion and corruption.”⁹⁶ Former Secretary of Defense Mark Esper was even more specific in a 2020 speech at the Asia-Pacific Center for Security Studies (APCSS) in Honolulu, stating that the United States’ Indo-Pacific strategy was designed to ensure that China does not undermine the region’s “free” and “open” regional order through its coercive activities.⁹⁷

While anodyne at first glance, Western narratives on freedom and openness in the Indo-Pacific amount to a shared normative framework for state relations rooted in Western concepts of democracy and economic liberalism.⁹⁸ With respect to democratic freedom in the Indo-Pacific, Western states are advocating for democratic systems of government, individual human rights, and political liberalism while pointedly critiquing autocratic states in the region such as China.⁹⁹ With respect to economic freedom, the Western states advocate for the free movement of people or goods, free markets, and free trade.¹⁰⁰

With respect to an “open” Indo-Pacific, Western states are committed to maritime openness, the openness of societies, and openness to Western activities and influence. Similarly, Western policy-makers use the word “open” with respect to markets, trade, and investment, all in contrast to the “closed” modes of protectionism, state-directed investment controls, and import substitutions.¹⁰¹

Freedom and openness, in this regard, are concepts distinctly aligned with Western values around liberal economics and democracy as well as the Western states’ self-perceived right to “fly, sail, and operate” anywhere within the Asian region permissible under international law.

Far from being universal in their application, they represent a Western hegemonic view of Asia's international relations and regional order that does not take the region's endogenous economic and governance systems and values into any account.¹⁰²

Viewed from this perspective, there are inherent contradictions in the "free" and "open" normative framework that informs Western and Western-aligned policy making toward the Indo-Pacific. Regarding the idea of freedom within the Asian region, Western concepts assume that Asian states and societies somehow lack freedom or that their understanding of freedom is somehow underdeveloped and in need of Western guidance and support. One need only view the Washington-based Freedom House's 2020 freedom index to see, for instance, how Asia is almost entirely composed of states lacking "freedom," defined in terms of democracy, civil liberties, and political rights.¹⁰³

Yet Western assumptions about Asian states' freedom deficits do not reflect Asian perceptions of freedom so much as they demonstrate Western paternalism.¹⁰⁴ Western scholarship tends to assume that lack of institutionalized freedom – such as constitutionally guaranteed freedoms of the press, of expression, or of religion – necessarily means that Asian societies lack freedom in practice.¹⁰⁵ While formalized political freedom in some Asian states is indeed limited, it is equally true that Asian societies are generally content with their political systems, often seeing Western-style democracy and freedom as little more than an excuse for ineffective governance (more on this topic in the next chapter).¹⁰⁶ Neither is it certain that Asian societies across the region see democratically defined freedom as the most effective means of ensuring their individual or collective rights.¹⁰⁷ The 2020 global pandemic, in particular, has greatly undermined the appeal of democracy and freedom in Asia, particularly in states like Indonesia where citizens express a willingness to trade nominal ideas of freedom for effective government.¹⁰⁸

Neither does the concept of openness as used in Western narratives about the Indo-Pacific accurately reflect the economic or security priorities of Asian states. On economic openness, for instance, many Asian nations (including, ironically, Japan) have relied, or are relying, on protectionism as a primary means of ensuring stable and continued economic growth.¹⁰⁹ For Asian states from Vietnam to Indonesia, from Malaysia to Thailand, industrial policies designed to provide state subsidies to specific companies and to limit foreign investment and

competition in industries deemed strategically significant are a feature of their economic systems, not a bug.¹¹⁰ The idea that Asian economies would somehow become more competitive through deregulation, or through more openness to foreign capital, is particularly out of step with Southeast Asian nations still scarred from the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis and the 2008 Global Financial Crisis, both of which clearly demonstrated the risk of too much “openness.”¹¹¹

On security openness, Western states are primarily concerned with maintaining their ability to operate without restriction within the Asian region, whether in the South China Sea or off China’s coastal waters, in line with their own interpretations of international law. For the United States in particular, strategic openness is closely related to its ability to intervene effectively in regional contingencies, most notably with respect to Taiwan and North Korea.¹¹² Similarly, Australia and Japan have equated Indo-Pacific openness with their ability to operate across with region with minimal restriction, and have identified Indo-Pacific security institutions such as the Quad and AUKUS as means of ensuring their operational openness.¹¹³ Western narratives on security openness in the Indo-Pacific are thus more about maintaining US-led military predominance in Asia than they are about responding to any particular threat.¹¹⁴

The belief that the United States and its allies need to preserve this level of security openness is based, however, on the strategic assumption the US-led alliance system is the most legitimate regional security institution and that any decrease in the system’s influence, power, or ability to direct regional security outcomes is unacceptable. Corollary to this is the idea that no other regional actor should have the means to resist US-led security pressure or to shape Asia’s security order in ways inimical to Western states’ strategic interests.¹¹⁵ Western narratives on the Indo-Pacific’s openness are less about ensuring inclusivity within Asia’s strategic environment than they are about preventing the regional development of a near-peer power, specifically China, that could potentially limit Western hegemony.¹¹⁶

There is, arguably, some regional demand for US-led military cooperation in Asia to counterbalance China’s growing influence. Scholarship on international security in Asia, for instance, has identified strategic balancing as an important component of Southeast Asian states’ foreign and security policies, in particular.¹¹⁷ Where Western narratives on Indo-Pacific openness exceed this regional demand is in

their unwillingness to account for change at the regional level that excludes Western state predominance. For instance, no Western narrative on Asia's security has identified support for China's ongoing negotiations with ASEAN over a code of conduct in the South China Sea as a potential instrument for achieving regional stability. Rather, the United States and its partners have summarily rejected the idea of a regional accord on maritime disputes as counter to international law and as a covert means for China to expand control over Southeast Asia.¹¹⁸ To suggest alignment between regional support for continued US and Western state engagement and regional support for openness in the Indo-Pacific is therefore to offer a false equivalence. Whereas Asian states welcome the former for its contribution to regional stability, they view the latter as a mechanism for continued US-led Western hegemony.¹¹⁹ Chapter 2, on Asian perspectives of Asian security regimes, addresses this divergence in greater detail.

To Construct a Strategy, Deconstruct the Region

For Canada as well as for other democratic middle powers, challenging the American hegemon's predominant narrative is inherently problematic as it is, in many ways, intrinsically tied to the country's own identity as a liberal power. For instance, when the Trump administration first outlined its "free" and "open" Indo-Pacific strategy, most Canadian scholars rushed to endorse the idea, as freedom and openness are Canadian values as much as they are American values. Similarly, when Canadian media portrayed China's foreign policy as inherently anti-democratic or as a threat to the rules-based order in Asia, few Canadian academics or policy-makers publicly disagreed. As Gramsci noted in his writing on historical materialism, there is little to no room for a dissenting voice within hegemonic discourse, as such discourse appeals to the very values that distinguish insiders from outsiders.¹²⁰

Such uniformity of thought is, however, antithetical to effective strategic development. Indeed, there is a broad body of literature ranging from business studies to corporate governance to military science that identifies diversity of thought as a critical input into any successful outcome, whether in product development or the drafting of a theatre campaign plan. States that adhere unquestioningly to the hegemon's viewpoints are therefore disadvantaged with respect to developing a national strategic approach that accurately reflects the operational

environment as it relates to the state's national security, economic, and political interests, or, collectively, national interests.

There is a clear responsibility, therefore, for those who study Asia's security environment to examine, to outline, and to present alternative scenarios that can contribute to greater situational awareness that Canadian policy-makers can, in turn, use to inform their policy processes and deliberations. In line with Kenneth Booth's admonition that the scholar's first role is that of advocate, scholarship, in its most fundamental form, should concern itself with critical examination of predominant systems to ensure that these systems are just and are not, conversely, tools for oppression.¹²¹ Indeed, it is the scholar's duty to challenge prevailing narratives through informed analysis, thereby ensuring greater diversity of thought and inclusivity of non-dominant yet equally valuable viewpoints.

This chapter has employed critical theory as an analytical framework for examining some of the primary meta-narratives in Western discourse on Asia. Its purpose has been to problematize the key concepts that inform Western strategy toward the region and to suggest that more critical analysis of Asia's primary institutions is needed, particularly analysis that includes reference to Asian narratives, viewpoints, and priorities. Too much of Western policy analysis and scholarship is built around narrative assumptions that are exclusionary, that are inherently biased in their formulation, and that prioritize Western state interests over regional stability. For Canadian policy-makers in particular, understanding the deficiencies in Western narratives on Asia is critical to successful strategy building in the region.

The remaining chapters build on this chapter's use of critical theory to demonstrate further areas where Western narratives fail to accurately represent Asia's emerging dynamics and state relations. Parallel to this, regional narratives on Asian developments at the strategic, operational, and tactical level are identified and described, including Asian perceptions on Western states' activities and identities in the region. Through this process, an alternative narrative is established that Canadian policy-makers can use to formulate a more holistic approach to Asia, one built on the core principles of omnidirectional diplomacy and strategic integration.

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