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POLICY PERSPECTIVE

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The government of Canada has once again rediscovered Southeast Asia. The Indo-Pacific Strategy, launched in late 2022 to great fanfare, promised to strengthen and renew Canada's engagement in the region. This includes increasing diplomatic and immigration staff in embassies, new funding for security, people-to-people exchanges, civil society engagement and more support for business efforts in the region. The architects of this strategy, whether they know it or not, owe a debt of gratitude to Canadian diplomats who served in the International Control Commissions (ICC) in Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos between 1954 and 1973.

The ICC were set up to monitor the truce that the Geneva Accords established in 1954, which created the conditions for France's retreat from its colonial holdings in what was then called Indochina. The truce also established, among other things, the countries of North and South Vietnam, allowing a period of time for people to migrate from one to the other. The countries overseeing the truce were Canada (for the West), Poland (for the Soviet Bloc) and India (for what were then called the neutral and non-aligned nations).

The presence of its diplomats in the commission offices in Hanoi, Saigon, Phnom Penh and Vientiane wasn't the beginning of Canada's presence in Asia, but it represented a very significant growth in the numbers posted there. In 1954, Canada had diplomatic representation in Japan, India, Pakistan, Ceylon, and a trade office in Jakarta. There had been an embassy in China that closed not long after the Communist victory, not to be reopened until 1970. Before the Second World War, we also had trade commissions in a few places in Asia, including Hong Kong, Shanghai and Mukden (now Shenyang). But the ICC created a sustained presence of Canadian diplomats throughout Southeast Asia, at a time of intense great-power competition in the region. For Canada in 1954, with its diplomatic interests focused primarily on the U.S. and across the Atlantic, this was mostly unknown territory.

The first ICC – the International Commission for Supervision and Control (ICSC) – set up in Geneva in 1954, created the conditions for France's exit from Indochina. It was succeeded in Vietnam in 1973 by the International Commission for Control and Supervision (ICCS), following the ceasefire agreement in Paris between the U.S. and North Vietnamese, which facilitated the American withdrawal from Vietnam. Canada, reluctantly and with conditions based on its experience in the earlier ICSC, agreed to participate, along with Poland and Hungary, and with Indonesia replacing India. When our experience in the ICCS quickly proved as problematic as it had been in the ICSC, then-secretary of state for External Affairs Mitchell Sharp decided that Canada should withdraw from the new commission. This it did at the end of July 1973.

For Canadians, both diplomats and military, working in both the ICSC and ICCS was often immensely frustrating. They were charged with investigating and reporting violations of the Geneva Accords, and later of the Paris Peace Accords, including such activities as illegal movement of troops and weapons into the region. However, all commission members had to approve any investigations and reports on such violations. Poland, and later Hungary as well,

never agreed to document illegal activities by the North Vietnamese. India had its own geopolitical agenda in the region which led it to delay and obstruct commission activities.

Nevertheless, the ICC experience was important not only to the Canadians who participated in it, but to Canada's Foreign Affairs bureaucracy and the long-term direction of Canadian foreign policy. Canadian staff, mostly young and new to Asia, saw the experience as a great adventure, as they found themselves in new, exotic places, and in the midst of some of the 20th century's defining events. One Canadian diplomat and several Canadian military personnel died while on duty in Indochina. Many others encountered challenging situations in what became a very active war zone. What is striking is how these Canadians turned the situation into an opportunity to do some critically important political reporting, and how the Canadian office in places like Saigon became, as some describe it, a de facto embassy of Canada, strengthening and highlighting our presence.

Canada also was uniquely positioned in the region. Canadians, with offices in Hanoi and Saigon, were the only Westerners who could travel between the two Vietnamese capitals. The Americans and journalists sought the views of Canadian commission personnel on North Vietnamese intent and capabilities, and at one stage enlisted, with Ottawa's permission, a senior Canadian commission diplomat to send messages to Hanoi.

The presence of Canadians in the commissions had a long-term impact on Canada's international diplomacy and the foreign service. By 1974, more than one-third of Canada's diplomats had served in the ICC. Their work on the two commissions laid the groundwork for Canada's expanded interests in Asia, and in the process created a corps of senior managers with significant Asia experience who drove and refined Canada's engagement in the region. Under Pierre Trudeau at this time, Canada's interest in strengthening bilateral relations in Asia had started to gain more momentum.

In many respects, the story of the ICC is a forgotten chapter in Canadian diplomatic history, partly because Canada's attention to the region has been wavering and uneven over the past decades. But Canada's role in the ICC is not forgotten in Southeast Asia: Officials in Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam still refer to this era in Canadian diplomatic history, which helps support Canada's old and faded image of being a peacekeeper and helpful intermediary.

Two books have captured the experiences and recollections of Canadian diplomatic personnel who participated in the commissions: *Canadian Peacekeepers in Indochina 1954–1973: Recollections*, by Arthur Edward Blanchette[1]; and *Supervising a Peace that Never Was: Recollections of Canadian Diplomatic Personnel in Indochina, 1954–1973* (2023).[2]

It is now over 50 years since Canada ended its commitment to the ICC that started in 1954. These books are tributes to all those people, civilians and military, who participated in the commissions.

[1] Published in 2001 and available from Amazon and Abe Books
[2] An online book published by the Centre for Asia-Pacific Initiatives at the University of Victoria, https://www.uvic.ca/research/centres/capi/research/home/researchpublications/capi-publications2/index.php

About the Author

Phil Calvert *joined the Department of External Affairs in 1982. Subsequently he had three postings in Beijing, in 1984-7, 1994-7 and 2004-8. He also served as Director of the Technical Barriers to Trade Division at Ottawa headquarters, and was Deputy Chief Negotiator for 113 Canada during China's accession to the World Trade Organization. From 2021-2016 he was Ambassador to Thailand, Cambodia and Laos. He retired in 2016.*

Nick Etheridge *joined the Department of External Affairs in 1967. He was posted to Canberra Australia in 1968-70, to ICSC Vietnam in 1972 and to ICCS South Vietnam in 1973. Subsequently he had a number of European assignments related to Canada's participation in the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe, was Canada's representative in Cambodia in 1993, Chargé d' Affaires in the Baltic Countries 1993-5 and High Commissioner to Bangladesh 1996-9. He retired in 2002 after being Director of Defence Relations Division at headquarters.*

Helen Lansdowne *is the Associate Director of the Centre for Asia-Pacific Initiatives (CAPI), at the University of Victoria. She specializes in issues of development and gender in Southeast Asia and rural China state-society relations. Helen was instrumental in helping to administer seminal justice system development work in the emerging economies of Vietnam and Cambodia in the early 2000s, and, in addition to overseeing CAPI's overall operations and administration, helped to establish and run the centre's highly regarded international student internship program for outgoing Canadian students as well as the centre's incoming cultural exchange and training programs, undertaken by thousands of visiting students and hundreds of cross-sector professionals from across Asia. Helen teaches Gender Studies in the Department of Social Sciences at Camosun College, is co-editor of numerous academic volumes, many derived from international CAPI conferences, and helped found CAPI's online, open access journal Migration, Mobility, & Displacement.*

Canadian Global Affairs Institute

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