



By: Tomorrow's Affairs Staff

Canada's major shift away from China brings it closer to allied policies in the Pacific



One Trudeau (Pierre), opened the door to a modern era of Canada-China relations, and the other Trudeau (Justin), is closing it, half a century later.

Canada's long period of favouritism towards China, as a strategy to provide China a chance to modernise, liberalise and thus become an acceptable partner to everyone in the West, has been coming to an end in recent months, with a U-turn made by Justin Trudeau's government.

Canada is the latest among major Western partners to restrict its relations with China and thus confirm that it wants to participate with its traditional allies in the reconfiguration of the Indo-Pacific policy.

This change did not happen overnight. It took a full five years for Canada's policy towards China to change from its former attitude that "China is an important partner for Canada" to "China is an increasingly disruptive global power".

This is now the position of Canada's Indo-Pacific Strategy, which the government announced in Vancouver last November.

The strategy of moving away from China

This strategic document encapsulates Ottawa's more or less clear hints that it has been changing its policy towards China.

One of the clearest messages was sent less than a month before the publication of the Indo-Pacific Strategy, when the Canadian government ordered three Chinese companies to divest themselves of their investments in critical minerals companies on the grounds of national security.

This was followed by an unpleasant meeting between Prime Minister Trudeau and Chinese leader Xi Jinping in Indonesia at the G20 summit, where there were reports that Canada accused China of secretly funding 11

candidates in the federal elections, as well as the public leaking of the content of earlier conversations between Trudeau and Xi.

The cooling of relations has been visible not only at the state level and in big business. For example, Canada has drastically reduced the number of study permits for Chinese students, so in 2022, significantly fewer permits than were issued four years earlier.

Canada has evolved from being an important promoter of China's involvement in global economic flows and the most vocal Western supporter of its 2001 World Trade Organisation membership.

Joining US politics

The triggers for Canada's significant shift have been the latest trends in Chinese politics under President Xi. The secrecy surrounding the cause of the Covid-19 pandemic, the deceleration and halting the liberalisation of the Chinese economy, the widespread use of surveillance technology in the service of the autocratic government, and the aggressive attitude towards Taiwan are some of the main drivers of Canada's change of policy.

It is a response to China's ambition to achieve dominance in the Indo-Pacific region, not only in the economic and technological areas, but also in terms of security.

This, combined with the autocratic nature of the government in China, the systematic violation of human rights, and protectionism in the internal market, has been turning China into an undesirable partner for Canada. Canada's shift also represents joining an increasingly harsh US policy towards China. The US has always been Canada's first and most important partner and ally.

"There was no pressure" from Washington on the Trudeau administration to harden its approach on China, said US ambassador to Canada David Cohen.

"Canada's Indo-Pacific strategy reflects a shared world view to support a more secure

and prosperous region that serves the needs of their citizens”, said Mr. Cohen.

Will Canada soon join AUKUS and Quad?

One of the first major positive consequences of Canada's new Indo-Pacific strategy could be its inclusion in several important regional initiatives in the Pacific that have been launched in recent years without its participation.

Although a Pacific country itself, Canada is not in AUKUS, a bloc consisting of the US, Australia and the UK, whose purpose is security cooperation in the Pacific region in response to China's growing military ambitions.

Canada is not part of the Indo-Pacific Quadrilateral Dialogue (Quad), which includes Japan and India in addition to the US and Australia. The forum develops security cooperation in the region, but also deals with navigation issues and strategic resources necessary for the development of new technologies.

“It has created the circumstances in which Canada is not at the table with allies in terms of shaping rules and shaping the dynamics of the Indo-Pacific region”, said Stephen Nagy, a political science professor at International Christian University in Tokyo and research fellow at the Canadian Global Affairs Institute according to the Wall Street Journal.

After the adoption of a new strategy for the Indo-Pacific, and the changed rhetoric of Ottawa towards China, it is certain that Canada will be more actively involved in allied policies in the Pacific region.

“The Indo-Pacific Strategy marks a sea change in Canadian policymaking that will have far-reaching implications across a range of policy files, including research and development, investment and trade policy, defence and national security, energy and climate, and so

forth. Every policy decision will need to be subjected to a new geopolitical lens rooted in Canada's national interests”, assessed Sean Speer from The Hub.

Partners also want Canada to be more active in affairs and strategies in the Pacific, given its enormous economic, technological and security resources, as well as its interests.

Australia and Canada are “ideal Indo-Pacific partners”, according to John Garrick from Charles Darwin University and Margaret McCuaig-Johnston from the University of Ottawa.

“A new, more co-ordinated approach to the Indo-Pacific strategy will serve Australian and Canadian diversification plans and deepen diplomatic engagement and partnerships more generally. This approach signals to traditional allies, including the US, the UK, Australia and New Zealand, that Canada is more closely aligning with them”, said the researchers.