



## HOW FEMINIST IS CANADA'S INDO-PACIFIC STRATEGY?

### PART I: THE GOOD

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Canada's [Indo-Pacific strategy](#) (hereafter, CIPS or "the strategy"), launched in late 2022, is a strong assertion of Ottawa's mutual strategic interests, the aspirations of a middle power, and a Pacific state's position in the Indo-Pacific that represents over \$9 trillion in economic activity. Canada's Indo-Pacific Strategy was aptly summed up by the country's Minister of Foreign Affairs, [Mélanie Joly](#):

*"The future of the Indo-Pacific is our future; we have a role to play in shaping it. To do so, we need to be a true, reliable partner. Today, we are putting forward a truly Canadian strategy—one that involves every facet of our society. It sends a clear*

*message to the region that Canada is here, and they can trust we are here to stay."*

Canada's CIPS highlights the country's commitment to making the free, open, and prosperous Indo-Pacific more inclusive through an emphasis on human rights, sustainable development goals (SDGs), and a feminist foreign policy (FFP)—[defined](#) as policy that rebalances power inequalities, and is informed by the everyday experiences of people who feel the consequences of such policies. While Canada has not developed an FFP, in 2017 the country launched its [Feminist International Assistance Policy](#) (FIAP), its international assistance programming policy centered on championing gender equality. The FIAP has become the country's de facto FFP, making Canada the second nation in the world (after Sweden) to develop such a policy. Furthermore, since the launch of the FIAP, Global Affairs Canada (GAC) has announced and begun listening sessions for establishing a formal FFP. The FIAP centers on gender equality and women's rights, and specifies that Canadian foreign policy—including diplomacy, trade, security, development, and consular services—builds on a series of sectoral feminist policies and initiatives developed in recent years.

The new CIPS makes clear references to Canada's FIAP as a key focus of Canada's approach to the Indo-Pacific. But has the FIAP informed CIPS enough to give it feminist credentials? Referring to both the FIAP and [dialogue documents](#) related to development of a formal FFP, the following analysis looks at how the strategy aligns with Canada's own feminist principles. Part I of the discussion—covered in this article—begins by looking at how well CIPS aligns with Canada's FFP in four topic areas foundational to a middle power like Canada and its aspirations in the Indo-Pacific. These include i) regional peace, resilience, and security, ii) boosting trade with and within the region, iii) norm-setting and commitment to rule of law, and iv) promoting people-to-people connections, and sustainable future.

### Promoting peace, resilience, and security

To examine the Strategy's peace and security pillar, we look at [the FIAP](#), which references Canada's

National Action Plan (NAP) for Women, Peace and Security (WPS), a policy that addresses more than an increase in representation of women in the military. It takes a whole-of-government approach covering not only peace and security policies, but also development assistance and humanitarian action. Furthermore, the FIAP covers participation of women and girls in peacebuilding, women's rights in post-conflict state-building, and sexual violence in conflict, wherein it specifically ties women's (human) security to larger security challenges. With this in mind, it is reassuring to see that CIPS calls for the increase of women peacekeepers, though this is perhaps the only way the Strategy aligns with Canada's FFP on these topics.

### **Boosting trade with and within the region**

On trade, the FIAP acknowledges that trade has “not always benefited everyone equally,” noting the importance of a progressive trade agenda that considers gender equality during trade negotiations, as well as strong environmental protections and labor rights. It calls out the importance of addressing sexual and gender-based violence, consultations with women's organizations and movements, and the need to consider differential needs of women and men in Canada's trade agenda.

So, how does CIPS stack up against these aspirational goals? It uses progressive rhetoric like emphasizing the need to support a trade system that is inclusive to create economic prosperity for everyone; enhances support for women entrepreneurs; and expands international partnerships through Canada's [Women Entrepreneurship Strategy](#) (WES), designed to “help women grow their business through increased access to financing, talent, networks and mentorship.” It also hints at engaging in regional cooperation through a commitment to working within local economic systems by developing a Canada-ASEAN free trade agreement, a comprehensive economic partnership with Indonesia to launch a Canadian trade gateway in Southeast Asia, the Canada-India early progress trade agreement (EPTA). Prioritizing women, pluralism, and emphasizing collaboration over competition are all strategies that align well with the FFP.

### **Norm-setting and building a sustainable green future**

An important element of Canada's [FIAP](#) is the emphasis on “collaborating” in common causes and “learning” from partners. As such, engaging with existing regional frameworks is one way to put Canada's FFP principles into practice. On this, the Strategy reinforces Canada's multilateral missions to the United Nations, the European Union, and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, and of course reinforces Canada's commitment to its WPS NAP. The strategy also notes plans to appoint a special envoy to coordinate a whole-of-government approach, espouses ASEAN centrality, and calls for advancing Canada's relationship with ASEAN to the level of strategic partner. By these measures, CIPS demonstrates Canada's willingness to prioritize the voices of the region.

Looking at objectives 3 (investing in and connecting people) and 4 (Building a sustainable and green future) of the Strategy allows us to examine both development and non-traditional challenges within Canada's middle power tool chest. Canada's FFP Dialogue has leaned into a development agenda focused on achieving the SDGs by 2030, in part through the full and equal participation of women, and a focus on resilience through environmental protection and climate change mitigation. The FIAP also notes the importance of education and business development opportunities for women, and the need to address the disproportionate burden of unpaid care and domestic work of women.

How does the strategy address these issues? First, and most promisingly, it references expansion of the FIAP, focuses on entrepreneurship through the WES, and connects to many other [women-focused partner programs](#). The strategy also offers a host of green and sustainable investment programs, like FinDev sustainable infrastructure investments; the Dark Vessel Detection program (designed to halt IUU fishing); DRR expertise sharing; Expand Canada Climate Finance Commitment; Powering Past Coal & cleantech demonstrations; and Advancing Canada's Global Carbon Pricing Challenge, among others.

## Conclusion

Canada's Indo-Pacific Strategy has many progressive elements, wherein it references Ottawa's [Feminist International Assistance Policy](#) and other feminist principles in important aspects of Indo-Pacific growth, trade, connectivity, prosperity and inclusiveness. There is explicit recognition of the centrality of the Women, Peace and Security agenda which reflects a gender-sensitive awareness of Ottawa's strategy towards the Indo-Pacific. These alone make Canada's Indo-Pacific Strategy normatively progressive compared to other Indo-Pacific strategies. However, as Part II will suggest, the Strategy diverges from Canada's previously stated feminist principles in some crucial ways.

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