Wanted: A Canadian full court press on Asia

By Don Campbell, Paul Evans, and Pierre Lortie

Asia is back on the radar as Prime Minister Stephen Harper met his Trans-Pacific counterparts in Russia at the Asia Pacific Economic Co-operation Leaders’ Summit this weekend.

Mr. Harper and his ministers have been actively promoting ties with Asia in the past year. But missing is a coherent and articulated approach that is understood by Canadians, and perceived by Asians, to be more than just a series of disconnected initiatives.

Canada’s future prosperity and wellbeing will depend on how we engage with an Asia that is fast increasing its share of world economic output, managing a tectonic shift in power relations including China’s rise, and quickly gaining influence in global institutions. It is rapidly integrating economically, but facing sharp inter-state rivalries and unresolved intra-state conflicts.

Canada in the past 40 years has been a serious and respected player across the Pacific. Our nemesis has been staying power. Success in Asia, as countries such as Australia continue to demonstrate, takes not just a whole-of-government but a whole-of-country approach, a cross-partisan consensus, and long-term commitment on multiple levels involving government, business, educators, and civil society.

A one-legged approach focused on commercial relations and emerging markets alone is destined to fail. A comprehensive connection including political and security processes is needed to demonstrate Canadian commitment and capacity.

To be successful in Asia, we need a national strategy that combines deeper bilateral relations along with full participation in the region’s key institutions and processes. At a moment of economic dynamism, political turbulence, and geopolitical transition, Asia’s nascent and often slow-moving institutions matter.

Economically, the Asian noodle bowl of free trade agreements is a second best option to a successful Doha round. Yet it is a game we must play. So far Ottawa has initiated negotiations with several countries (Singapore, Korea, India, and Japan) but completed none and is looking at FTAs with China and Thailand.

We are suffering, while our competitors who have done so are gaining tangible market advantages at our expense.

The recent invitation to attend the Trans-Pacific Partnership negotiations is an important but uncertain step forward.

Canada has been a declining player in APEC since hosting the summit in Vancouver in 1997. While there are concerns about its declining relevance and possible eclipse by the East Asia Summit process, it deals with significant trade facilitation matters and is a symbol of regional commitment. It’s time to reinvigorate our participation and offer to host the 2017 summit.

For the moment, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations is at the centre of the most inclusive forms of multilateralism. Canada recently signed its Treaty of Amity and Co-operation and has made adjustments in its Burma policy that have dealt it back into ASEAN-style institution building.

But we are not yet a member of the East Asia Summit process that may be emerging as the most important...
meeting of leaders in the region. Nor are we a member of the ASEAN Defence Members Plus meetings. We need to be at both tables. The rediscovery of ASEAN by the prime minister and senior ministers including John Baird and Ed Fast is a first step in re-establishing Canadian credibility.

The region does not expect Canada to be a major player in military deployments, though a presence in multilateral exercises like RIMPAC and ship visits are welcome. What the region does expect is an active Canadian role beyond the perfunctory in processes like the ASEAN Regional Forum.

Our interests and capabilities in non-traditional security issues including conflict resolution, people smuggling, and trafficking in persons, trans-boundary water disputes are recognized and well received.

The recent American rebalancing or pivot toward Asia is an unmistakable sign of the significance of Asia and being accompanied by a full court press with economic, commercial, military, and social dimensions. A similar full court press by Canada is in order with a game plan, new resources, and better communication among the players on the court.

A more co-ordinated and prominent role in regional affairs through bilateral and multilateral means is a necessary adjustment to a new Asian reality. And it is essential in securing Canada’s place in an Asia Pacific region that is key to our future prosperity and security.

Don Campbell, senior strategy advisor at Davis LLP, Paul Evans, professor of International Relations at the University of British Columbia, and Pierre Lortie, senior business advisor at Fraser Milner Casgrain LLP, are co-authors of a recently published taskforce report titled Securing Canada’s Place in Asia: Institutions, Means and Mechanisms, that was published by the Asia Pacific Foundation of Canada (www.asiapacific.ca).

editor@embassymag.ca

http://embassymag.ca/page/printpage/courtpress-09-12-2012