

THREAT ASSESSMENT

CHINA, SOFT POWER & MULTILATERALISM:
Contextualizing The Beijing Xiangshan Forum
(BXF)

Raphael Racicot | Kurtis H. Simpson | Adam P. MacDonald
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CONFERENCE OF DEFENCE ASSOCIATIONS INSTITUTE

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Introduction

International defence conferences are a staple of modern diplomacy. They unite political leaders, diplomats, military officers, academics, and think tank analysts to promote exchanges and cooperation on politics, policy, and security questions. Taking place over multiple days, they usually include addresses by notable individuals, thematic discussions, panels and opportunities for participants to interact. In the Indo-Pacific context, the Shangri-La Dialogue (SLD), an annual ‘Track 1’ inter-governmental meeting hosted by the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), is the preeminent example of this, bringing together defence ministers, heads of ministries, as well as military chiefs (predominantly from the region, but also from the rest of the world) as a community of interested stakeholders (alongside journalists, academics, legislators, and business experts) to consider international security matters face-to-face (INSS, 2024).¹

The Beijing Xiangshan Forum (BXF) represents the Chinese Communist Party’s (CCP) alternative to the SLD. As a Track 1.5 event, it targets both state officials and individuals involved in defence and security for discussions, meetings and workshops. Organized every fall, the 11th iteration of the BFX took place September 12-14, 2024. Attended by over 700 participants with delegations from 89 countries and international organisations, it has become a notable gathering. Moreover, the event is becoming increasingly institutionalized with mid-year ‘navigator meetings’ (designed as preparatory sessions) being implemented for the first time this year (Wong, 2024).

Despite its growing size and importance to Chinese foreign policy, the BXF receives little attention from Western media, with usually only superficially comments on the keynote addresses, notably those of Russian and Chinese representatives. Discussions of the panels and the diplomacy (which takes place in the background) is more extensively covered by Chinese and non-Western foreign media. It is noteworthy that Canada normally only sends a small delegation of

senior military staff, policy specialists and liaison officials to attend. This lack of attention obfuscates both the reality and importance of this annual summit and its challenge to Western leadership.

To adequately assess the significance of the BXF, and to address the policy challenges it is posing, it is crucial to ascertain how this forum serves China’s foreign policy. This paper will help fill this knowledge gap, arguing that the BXF is a representative example of the use of multilateral platforms for China to promote its alternative institutions, using them as sources of ‘soft power’ and venues for both rhetoric and outreach. To do so, first, the BXF will be contextualized within the international security conference ecosystem. Second, the 2024 iteration of the BXF will be described and analyzed, noting important speeches, meetings and other events. Third, we will discuss how the BXF facilitates China’s foreign and military diplomacy, CCP rhetoric, and its greater involvement in global affairs, with a particular nod to Beijing’s various ‘Global Initiatives’. Finally, we will explore the implications of the forum for both Canada and its allies and propose policy recommendations to consider.

Contextualizing the BXF

The BXF has grown in prominence and size over the years, evolving into a major global defence and security event. It is organised by the China Association of Military Science, a subordinate element of the People Liberation Army’s (PLA) Academy of Military Science, and the China Institute for International Strategic Studies (a think tank associated with the Chinese Foreign Ministry) (Dotson, 2019). When it was created in 2006, it was a small biannual Track 2 event which hosted 24 delegates from 12 countries (Beijing Xiangshan Forum, 2025). Beijing’s objective was to “provide a platform for Chinese and international defence intellectuals from government and non-government organizations to discuss international security concerns, challenges and opportunities” (Chaturvedy 2021, 438). It witnessed modest growth in attendance until 2014 when participation increased

sixfold with its promotion to a Track 1.5 event under Chinese president Xi Jinping. In 2015, the event became an annual occurrence. It was halted during the Covid-19 pandemic, but resumed in 2023 (Beijing Xiangshan Forum, 2025).

The BXF is a clear example of the People's Republic of China's (PRC) use of soft power multilateralism (Duarte et al., 2024). It seems that China is cognisant that it cannot achieve its foreign (and related military) policy objectives without ensuring the cooperation of other states and the benefits of the legitimacy that comes with this. An understudied domain, China's commitment to serving as what Buzan labels a "revisionist reformer" (Buzan, 2010) focuses on its striving to change the existing system through a combination of altering existing institutions deemed not currently serving Chinese national interests and by creating entirely new ones (such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank) when necessary or advantageous. In short, the BXF is being used by Beijing to promote its image internationally, normalize its often-coercive behaviour exercised through "grey zone" operations, and increase its influence over other states through suasion, political posturing and economic leveraging and threats.

By organizing its own regional security conference, the CCP builds relationships and gains prestige with participant states, contextualizes issues in favorable ways, and frames 'China's story' in a positive manner. This strategy reflects the top-down direction in Chinese diplomacy and counters negative international perceptions. The event also serves an outreach function for championing China's alternative to the Rules-Based International Order (RBIO), made up of its proposition for reforms and the various institutions it has created. For example, the BXF indirectly promotes China's arms industry and is used as a communication tool for Beijing's Global Security Initiative (GSI)—its stated vision for global security. While China continues to participate in the existing system (though often seeking to reform it), for more than a decade it has surreptitiously sought to create its own platforms used to serve its specific national interests (Stuenkel 2017, 203). In short, this forum is a

vehicle for China to present itself as an alternative leader in international affairs and a provider of regional solutions to shared security challenges.

Framing the BXF In the International Context

International security forums have become a cornerstone of foreign policy and defence cooperation and dialogue. While Track 2 events focus on 'unofficial activities involving academics, think tank researchers, journalists, and former officials, as well as current officials participating in their private capacities', Track 1 events are platforms seeking official participation by governments. There is some expectation that security forums be administered by independent organizations, which is the case for most events, but not for the BXF (Ball et al., 2006).

Different conferences have unique foci or defining identities. The Munich Security Conference, for example, was long focused on the trans-Atlantic community, but has since expanded its scope to broader international security matters since the end of the Cold War (Ischinger 2014, 32-33). The Halifax International Security Conference brands itself as an event for democracies (Magnuson 2019, 8), while the Shangri-La Dialogue is centred on the Indo-Pacific (Taylor 2011, 54). These conferences facilitate both formal and informal dialogue, the opinions of experts, coalition building, and a means to challenge misperceptions and foster confidence (Ischinger 2014, 32). Canada has been an avid participant in the most noteworthy venues. For instance, the then Minister of Foreign Affairs, Melanie Joly, attended the 2025 Munich Security Conference where she personally delivered remarks, actively participated in panels, and met with foreign counterparts, notably the Ukrainian Minister of Foreign Affairs (Global Affairs Canada 2025a, Global Affairs Canada 2025b). The Minister of Defence at the time, Bill Blair, accompanied by then Chief of Defence Staff, General Wayne Eyre, attended the 2024 Shangri-La Dialogue and delivered a statement during a plenary session (National Defence, 2024).

The BXF sells itself as “created on the principles of equality, openness, inclusiveness and mutual learning,” which is affirmed by efforts to include the Global South through attendance and participation in discussions (Zhang, 2019). Chinese officials justify the value of the conference on the grounds that many non-western countries (and often critics of U.S. hegemony) have no chance to voice their dissatisfaction at other fora, which they argue are dominated by the West. The BXF, in sharp contrast, presents a platform where lesser states can speak and express themselves in a receptive environment of like-minded peers (People’s Daily, 2019).

The BXF forum is truly structured as an alternative to the Shangri-La Dialogue (Royal United Services Institute, 2015). The latter attracts a more senior audience, with both Western and Asian defence ministers, chiefs of staff, and the occasional heads of state attending. At the SLD, China receives as much criticism as it gives out. For example, at this year’s dialogue, the United States responded to Chinese criticism of its military presence in the region by stating that it sought security in Asia because it was essential to its own security (Reuters, 2024a). The Philippines’ current president, Bongbong Marcos, also countered Chinese narratives about the South China Sea by denouncing Beijing for its “illegal, coercive actions” (South China Morning Post, 2024a). Ukraine’s President, Volodymyr Zelenskyy, furthermore denounced the PRC for its support to Russia’s war effort (South China Morning Post, 2024b). In comparison, at the BXF, critics of China are less present, supplanted by states more open to Beijing’s discourse, or at least less prone to publicly state criticisms. This self-selection bias affords Beijing the opportunity to steer the narrative, foster an illusion of consensus, and largely dominate the proceedings in a manner favourable to its preferred messaging.

In advance of the upcoming 2025 iteration of the forum, it is important to appreciate the dynamics, challenges, and outcomes of the last summit. This is especially the case considering the preparatory meeting recently held in advance of the 2025 forum was attended by more than 30 countries and

international organizations, pointing to China’s growing commitment to invest in the platform and the willingness of other countries to participate (Ministry of National Defense of the People’s Republic of China, 2025).

The 11th Beijing Xiangshan Forum

The lead-up to the 2024 iteration of the BXF was tense as Germany sailed ships through the Taiwan Strait the day before the opening ceremony and U.S.-China talks were expected on the sidelines (Reuters, 2024b). The United States ultimately sent Michael Chase, then Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for China, Taiwan and Mongolia to the event, who was a relatively low-level official but nevertheless in-line with the seniority of previously dispatched heads of American delegations (Channel News Asia, 2024). His meetings with Chinese military leaders covered issues of peace in the Indo-Pacific as well as U.S.-China relations (Lo, 2024). In 2024, a record number of delegates convened, including more than 30 defence ministers and military chiefs from Germany, Singapore, Sri Lanka, Cambodia, Belarus, Laos, South Africa, Congo, and Tanzania (The Diplomatic Insight, 2024) as well as the deputy defense minister of Russia (a lower level of representation compared to previous years), the chairman of Pakistan’s Joint Chiefs of Staff Committee, and the chief of general staff of Iran (INSS, 2024).

The theme for the 2024 forum was ‘Promoting Peace for a Shared Future’, with four major sessions addressing themes aligned with China’s policy perspectives. These included: ‘The Role of the Global South in International Security’; ‘Maintaining Peace and Development in the Indo-Pacific’; ‘Improving International Security Mechanisms’; and ‘Achieving a Balanced and Orderly Multipolar World’. Side panels discussed a variety of themes, most notably regional ‘hot spots,’ emerging technologies, arms control, and humanitarian issues (Beijing Xiangshan Forum, 2025). Chinese state media emphasized that the keyword

'peace' became the dominant theme of the event (Global Times, 2024a). Xi Jinping's remarks, transmitted by a congratulatory written letter, referenced China's Global Security Initiative and called for increased solidarity and the elimination of the sources of international conflict (Kewalramani 2024, 21). Meanwhile, Chinese Minister of National Defence, Admiral Dong Jun, highlighted that China seeks "a new security approach based on the greatest common denominator, rather than the interests of small groups" and called for regional states to "seek strength through unity and rely on themselves for their own peace" and for the world to build a "community with a shared future for mankind" (Global Times, 2024a). He went on to call for the U.S. to "abandon a zero-sum mindset and refrain from bullying the small and the weak" as well as to withdraw from the region (Reuters, 2024c). Lieutenant General He Lei, former Vice President of the Academy of Military Sciences of the Chinese PLA, affirmed that Taiwan is "an inalienable part of China," denounced U.S. arms sales to the island, and blamed the Philippines for frequent clashes in the South China Sea (Global Times, 2024b).

The Deputy Minister of Defence of the Russia Federation, Alexander Fomin, was also in attendance giving Russia a rare, high-profile platform especially considering that it had not attended the Shangri-La Dialogue since its invasion of Ukraine in 2022 (Reuters, 2024a). Fomin's address accused the U.S. of trying to contain Russia and China while creating security blocs in Asia to prepare for war. He denounced Washington for "suppressing any independent political, economic, technological and developmental centre outside the control of the U.S. and its allies, allowing it and its "satellite states" to "maintain their leading status that has been lost in the world" (Lo, 2024). Fomin insisted that China and Russia "support the creation of a just, multipolar world based on equality and mutual respect" (Reuters, 2024c). Iran's Chief of Staff further criticized the U.S. for interfering and causing problems by creating terrorist forces in other countries (INSS, 2024). Several leaders from the Global South made similar speeches, demanding a "New World Order," reforms to the UN Security Council, and greater equality in world

politics. There was repeated recognition of China's efforts in providing multilateral platforms which serve as alternatives to American-led ones (INSS, 2024).

Chinese officials, moreover, used the event to conduct multiple bilateral meetings, which led to commitments to further defence cooperation. General He Weidong, then second-ranked Vice-Chairman of the Central Military Commission (CMC), the most senior executive body in charge of the PLA, met with officials from South Africa, Pakistan, and Myanmar, committing to greater military cooperation (People's Daily, 2024).² Notably, Myanmar and China agreed to collaborate on military technology and to conduct personnel exchanges (Global New Light of Myanmar, 2024). Before the forum's opening, General Zhang Youxia, first-ranked Vice-Chairman of the CMC, likewise met with the defence chiefs of Singapore and Cambodia (Lo, 2024). General Zhang also hosted the Vietnamese Minister of National Defence, during which the two parties agreed to deepen political and military ties (Vietnam Union of Friendship Organizations, 2024). Additionally, the Chief of the Joint Staff of the PLA, General Liu Zhenli, held talks with the Ethiopian Chief of General Staff, with the pair signing a memorandum of understanding (MOU) which addressed technology transfer, cooperation on military equipment, and capacity building (Ethiopian News Agency, 2024). Finally, to complete the full-court press, Defense Minister Dong met with Chilean, Madagascan, Mauritanian, Maldivian, Tajik, Belarusian, Armenian, as well as Russian officials. Common themes were increased cooperation and the reiteration of their strict adherence to a "One-China" Policy (China Military Online, 2024).

The Beijing Xiangshan Forum & Chinese Foreign Policy

Beijing seeks to increase its influence to deepen its global diplomatic reach and reform the existing international order to its benefit. Under Xi Jinping, China has set out to make the world a "favorable external environment for China's development"

(China Daily, 2017) requiring it to “develop a distinctive diplomatic approach” (Kewalramani 2024, 9-10) so it can “take center stage in the world” (BBC News, 2017). The CCP’s repeated and increasing efforts to organize and popularize the BXF point to its importance and effect. The BFX is a noteworthy example of the numerous events which constitute China’s foreign diplomacy and is one of many alternative networks created by China. It offers an opportunity for the PRC to build relationships with Global South countries, spread its anti-American narrative, promote its own foreign policy initiatives and posture as a leader in global politics.

Beijing has been developing its network of forums since the 2000s, which have now become an integral part of the PRC’s foreign policy strategy (dos Santos et al. 2023, 264). Today, China organizes numerous such gatherings, convening around different themes and aimed at different stakeholders.³ Often discussed platforms like the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and the Forum On China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) are regional focused entities, composed of a hierarchical structure of associated events from heads of state meetings to a large number of sub-fora discussing cooperation in numerous venues. Others, like the Boao Forum for Asia, are global in their geographical scope but narrow thematically: they invite all who wish to participate to discuss specified topics. To a large extent, China has adopted this diplomatic strategy because it is a multifaceted generator of soft power (Nye 2004, 10-14).

Xi Jinping insists on the need for China to revamp its image to “expand its circle of friends” (BBC News, 2021). Beijing obtains considerable global legitimacy and prestige by hosting international fora which unite participants where the CCP can present ‘solutions’. Furthermore, in such sessions Beijing can engage with targeted states often without interference from the U.S., Europe, or other Western allies. Participant states are attracted by the appearance of multilateralism and the access to Chinese leaders offered by such meetings (dos Santos et al. 2023, 267). But this promised multilateralism is often limited, as China frequently dominates the agenda setting with the substantive

business underlying these meetings frequently channeled and controlled through bilateral discussions (Jakóbowski 2018, 661-662).

One major advantage of a forum like the BXF is that it can be used by its organizers to promote a certain message. For China, forums are an opportunity for ‘telling China’s story well’, which is party speak for giving a positive spin to China’s history, foreign policy, and military ambitions (Hartig 2016, 657). For instance, Beijing has sought to alleviate anxieties about its preoccupation with augmenting its comprehensive national power through the discourse of its ‘peaceful rise’, which presents China as non-disruptive and positive, unlike great powers of the past (Okuda 2016, 121). The CCP, for example, stresses its intent to act for the good of mankind and to create a ‘community for a shared future’—a shorthand phrase used to encompass all of China’s discourse on a reformed international order (Zeng 2020, 111). Branding itself as a ‘steadfast constructive force in a changing world’ (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, 2025), China capitalizes on the BXF as an occasion to portray itself as the architect of a new global order (Suryanarayana, 2019).

China’s declared ambitions for global political reform are centered around what it frames as more democratic international relations, where all states get a voice (Tobin, 2018). This is a major component of BXF messaging, where China flaunts the participation of states considered part of the Global South (CGTN, 2024). Themes of panels from past forums indicate the omnipresence of Chinese discourse at the event, such as ‘Interests of Small and Medium-Sized Countries and Common Security’ in 2018, or ‘Promoting Peace for a Shared Future’ in 2024 (Beijing Xiangshan Forum, 2025). At the latter event, the Chinese Defence Minister’s opening speech made explicit reference to the PRC’s proclaimed international goals (Lo, 2024). Another central component of China’s rhetoric, a corollary to calls for greater democracy in international relations, is the criticism of American hegemony. In 2023, CMC Vice-Chairman General Zhang made a veiled attack on the United States, equating it with actors who ‘deliberately create

turbulence, meddle in regional affairs, interfere in other countries' internal affairs and instigate color revolutions' (Bloomberg, 2023).

In criticizing Washington's purported 'hegemonism', Beijing relies on meetings like the BFX to seed its own list of alternative global endeavours, such as the GSI.⁴ Announced by Xi Jinping in 2022, this is the second of three lines of effort for reform of the international system, alongside the Global Development Initiative (GDI) and the Global Civilization Initiative (GCI) (Kewalramani 2024, 16-25). Up to now, this forward vision has generated few concrete measures and has largely served as a public diplomacy effort and a framework for a sundry of other vague desired outcomes (Fravel, 2024). That said, key narrative points of the GSI include: the promotion of peaceful resolution of conflicts (CGTN, 2024); opposition to traditional military alliances (Kewalramani 2024, 32); and criticism of American foreign policy (Van Oudenaren, 2024). Specific concrete proposals called for by Beijing are mediation of ongoing conflicts, military and police personnel exchanges (Kewalramani 2024), the export of Chinese military and security technology, and greater cooperation between states, with all efforts positioning China as an alternative partner to the U.S. (International Institute Strategic Studies, 2024).

Lastly, the BFX is an opportunity for China to promote its growing arms industry and technological advances (Robin et al., 2024). Since the end of the Cold War, the PRC has been working to increase its arms exports and move up the value chain from small arms to more advanced equipment sales like vehicles, ships and missiles (Li and Matthews 2017, 185). It has worked to use the arms trade as a tool of influence, starting in South and Southeast Asia (Ruska and Bitzinger 2020, 93) but also expanding to Africa in recent years. China's arms industry has grown to be the fourth largest in the world, rivaling Russia's defence sector (RAND 2024). Chinese military equipment can now be found in 40 countries, specifically in South Asia, Sub-Saharan Africa and Southeast Asia (Gunter and Legarda, 2024). One major diplomatic advantage of arms sales for Beijing, especially in the case of more advanced systems, is that it forces the creation of

longer-term relationships with other states to ensure the training of personnel, the maintenance of the equipment, the provision of replacement parts, and the supply of ammunition (Sachar 2004, 291).

Arms exports allow China to influence regional geopolitics and build defence relations without relying on formal alliances (Yarhi-Milo et al., 2016). The BFX is a premier opportunity to showcase the latest products and technologies of Chinese defence firms, as well as bilaterally promote sales on the sidelines of meetings. Exhibition opportunities are an integral aspect of the agenda, where military goods as well as S&T innovation are showcased to potential clients (Charturvedy 2021, 444). The arms sales recently agreed to with Ethiopia are a testament to the success of this approach (Ethiopian News Agency, 2024).

Implications

When examining the nature and severity of the 'China threat', analysts in the West are predisposed to focus on measurables such as equipment, technology, force structure, the PRC's defence industry, bilateral military relations, as well as operations (particularly in and around the Taiwan Strait) (U.S. Department of Defense, 2024). This is appropriate and justified as Admiral Samuel J. Paparo, Commander of the United States Indo-Pacific Command, has stated: "China's unprecedented aggression and military modernization poses a serious threat to the [U.S.] homeland, allies and partners" (U.S. Senate Committee on Armed Services, 2025). That said, in so doing, we risk overlooking the extent to which China now relies on soft power and (in particular) multilateralism as significant levers to achieve its desired ends. The Beijing Xiangshan Forum is a case in point.

The BFX is illustrative of how the PRC is creating new international fora, often in direct competition with existing institutions and processes. In so doing, Beijing seeks to incrementally supplant the current international order and introduce alternatives to it. This is being achieved through various interrelated means. First, China sponsors novel venues and

justifies them according to carefully curated narratives which critique supposed inequities and Western biases. Within this framework, Beijing reinforces its own seemingly innocuous global initiatives (related to security, development, civilization, and infrastructure) to foster consensus across disparate partners. In these venues, which often favour non-Western states, China leads in agenda setting which directly or indirectly bolsters its preferred positions on select geopolitical matters (such as the nature of U.S. involvement in regional matters) and encourages subtle influencing opportunities which may promote and encourage 'group think' on prioritized issue-areas. In such environments, Beijing-backed economic incentives, trade, and developmental opportunities are often proffered. Likewise, the potential for augmented national security (such as Chinese supported policing efforts, or leadership development) as well as defence requirements (including arms sales, technology transfers, and joint military collaboration and exercises) frequently arise as considerations of mutual benefit. As a result, China is ultimately afforded the opportunity to counter perceptions of Sinophobia, foster confidence amongst less advantaged states, promote dissatisfaction with the West, and through global vision statements (often associated with "a new era") encourage communities of shared interests.

Recalibrating Canada's Indo-Pacific Approach

Effectively responding to China's emergence as an increasingly disruptive global power requires continually evolving consideration of strategies, effects, and readiness, available foreign and military options, as well as new critical thinking—all buttressed by ongoing and visible policy implementation in order to make Canada's preferences and commitments evident, enduring, and substantive. More specifically, despite its many strengths and insights, Canada's 2022 Indo-Pacific Strategy (IPS), is quickly becoming dated due to the profound changes occurring within the current international order (Boutilier 2023; Paltiel 2024). These changes include: the rapidly shifting nature of the U.S.

under the Trump Administration and its uncertain approach to the Indo-Pacific Region (IPR); the growing strategic relationship between China and Russia which impacts parts and elements of the IPR, specifically the North Pacific which is a prioritized sub-region for Canada (Canada's Indo-Pacific Strategy, 10); and the fact that Canada now has and will most likely continue to have divisive, or at the very least, tense relations with four of the major IPR powers: China, India, Russia and the United States.⁵

As a result, the geopolitical goal of the IPS and the ways to go about furthering these aims requires a reassessment. In doing so, Canada is in a unique, but difficult, strategic position. Leaving aside important issues of commitment and limited power resources, the main challenge for Canada in the IPR is countering perceptions and accusations, promoted by Beijing but also by some other regional states, that it is simply an appendage or 'tool' of the U.S., tightly aligned with select Western and national interests, that do not necessarily benefit the region as a whole.⁶ In reality, Canada is working ever more closely with a range of defence and security partners as the region has become strategically unbalanced, opening up the growing possible use of coercion, (including the threat of military force) by stronger states to alter the territorial and geopolitical status quo. Canada's goal is not to help facilitate the development of a hegemonic system dominated by any one power, or a bifurcated region of two competing blocs, but instead to maintain the IPR's 'strategic pluralism' (a state where no single interest can dominate). Achieving this goal necessitates active participation with an increased number of varied defence and security partners, both bilaterally and in minilateral configurations. (Feigenbaum, 2020).

Critics of the Trump administration assert that America is reducing its own soft power potential with the invocation of widespread tariffs, dramatic cuts to international development, the freezing of foreign aid, cuts to the State Department, the withdrawal from select international bodies (most notably the World Health Organization) and a more inward focused 'America First' policy orientation which (by some estimations) is negatively impacting the U.S.'s

international reputation.⁷ Notably, the U.S. Department of Defence also recently announced that it would cease to participate in think tank-organized events, specifying the Halifax International Security Forum (Detsch, 2025). Conversely, China's growing reliance on soft power and multilateralism, in support of more hard power military and economic instruments of statecraft, demands that Western countries fully appreciate this trajectory of Chinese foreign policy and, where necessary, take measures to effectively address it. In short, Canada has a 'new deterrence opportunity space' to coopt China's use of multilateralism vis-à-vis increased involvement in specific China-centric events (such as the BXF) or, alternatively, by making a conscious decision to proactively align and counter it through other venues (such as the growing number of trilateral and quadrilateral regional security cooperative initiatives now taking root in the region). Collaborative multi-state actions offer the potential to jointly offset the PRC's rising influence and increasingly determinative role in regional affairs.

To do so effectively, Canada's defence diplomacy, specifically by senior military officers, should be augmented to have substantial and sustained representation at all the various regional gatherings. This includes in 'non-friendly' (to Western states) settings, like the BXF, demonstrating that Canada is not intimidated to be present and participate in such discussions. Parallel venues would enable Canada to engage with a variety of regional states (including close partners of China and Russia), dilute attempts to turn them into anti-Western fora, and in general promote a culture of inclusion at all such events. These efforts will help counteract Beijing's discourse that their regional approach is one of inclusion and unity, whereas that of the West is one of exclusion and division. It will also further Canada's commitment to continue engaging with states that "we do not see eye-to-eye" with (Canada's Indo-Pacific Strategy, 6). While augmenting diplomatic efforts, including in multilateral contexts, is emphasized in the IPS, the defence diplomacy aspect is largely missing, as is a larger approach for how Canada perceives and intends to try to shape the strategic discourse in the IPR.

Two critical regional partners in furthering these, and related ambitions, are Japan and South Korea. Both states feature prominently in the IPS, with efforts underway to further strengthen already deep ties (Canada's Indo-Pacific Strategy, 10-12). Each, as an ally of both the United States and Canada, is increasingly grappling with bilateral economic, political and security tensions with Washington; concerns about the region's future trajectory amidst elevating threat perceptions; mounting Chinese revisionism, and increasing grey zone operations by the PRC—all the while self-identifying as middle powers with a keen interest in preserving the current regional and RBIO. Both states also have advanced defence industries (especially in the maritime domain), expansive connections throughout the region, and are important partners in monitoring and acting against malign and malicious activity in the North Pacific. While the IPS captures initiatives Canada is pursuing with each, there are several promising areas in which cooperation could be further accelerated. These include:

- Establishing defence industry relationships, specifically with respect to procurement, as well as joint research initiatives and the co-production of military assets (including submarines, mobile artillery, and air defence);
- Implementing novel minilateral cooperation efforts promoting increased and shared defence and security goals in the North Pacific;
- Undertaking joint defence diplomacy efforts throughout the region;
- Exploring ways to further cooperate and learn from one another about how to best manage relations with Taiwan, both recognizing existent commitments, but also new realities, opportunities, and possible threat scenarios which would alter the current status quo; and finally,
- Investigating ways to further relations between NATO and the 'Asia-Pacific 4' (Australia, Japan, New Zealand, and South Korea), especially in the North Pacific given its importance as a vector into North America and the Arctic which are core alliance regions of concern.

As a result, the following recommendations are advanced in addressing and furthering these issues:

1. Canada needs to be proactive, present, seen and heard at multilateral events where China is profiting from influence opportunities. Required situational understanding demands active involvement in Indo-Pacific regional fora (such as the BXF) where Canada can speak up on its perspectives and values, challenge questionable assertions, ‘fact-check’, blunt unsubstantiated attacks on the West, build trust with partners, and most importantly demonstrate a long-term commitment to this part of the world by affirming our status as a Pacific nation. The participation in 2024 of Jason Kenney, then Premier of Alberta, at the Ketagalan Forum in Taiwan is an example of how such platforms can be leveraged to enhance Canada’s diplomacy (Ketagalan Forum, 2025). Any decrease in U.S. multilateral commitments and international think tank engagement further creates new potentialities. Moreover, ‘opportunity space’ exists for Canada’s augmented engagement with developing nations in the region, most notably in Southeast Asia. For instance, Canadian technological leadership in improving Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA) vis-à-vis the provision of continuous maritime satellite surveillance data and analytics has been critical in promoting safe, secure and sustainable maritime operations in the sub-region. This arrangement has also now been extended to Taiwan as well. Similar new efforts would augment Canada’s diplomatic network, allow for cooperation to promote regional security, and ensure greater inclusivity in international security discussions.
2. Canadian analysis of China’s comprehensive national power must be nuanced, wide-ranging, and sophisticated. While we must do more with anticipated forthcoming defence funding increases, new defence initiatives need to consider a broad spectrum of deterrence options. Within this milieu, drawing on decades of good standing in the global community, Canada has the potential to both offset what some view as increasing American ‘absenteeism’ and to further counter China’s strategic intent to fill what has been described as a growing international soft power vacuum.
3. In the current international context marked by ‘flux’, it would also be an opportune moment for Canada to reconsider its traditionally narrow interpretation of our ‘One-China’ policy as a means of clarifying the differences between that understanding and Beijing’s strict ‘One-China principle.’ A number of countries have adopted more nuanced engagement strategies in this regard.⁸ As witnessed by the high-profile visit of a roster of senior former defence and security officials to Taiwan in September 2024, scope exists for Canada to explore novel bilateral and multinational opportunities that foster economic and people-to-people ties while reinforcing Taiwanese resilience.⁹
4. Finally, while the goals laid out in Indo-Pacific Strategy, such as countering China and “promoting peace, resilience and security” (Canada’s Indo-Pacific Strategy, 10) remain valid, the means to these ends are dramatically evolving. A reimagined approach modelled on military minilateralism, new collaborative defence relationships with key partners (most notably Japan and South Korea), and a rethinking of NATO’s role in the region is now urgently required.

Notes

¹ For an overview of, and Chinese perspective on the Shangri-la Dialogue, see Liu 2024.

² It is interesting to note the General He is the latest and one of the most senior PLA leaders to apparently be the target of Xi's ongoing anti-corruption campaign.

³ Other examples not mentioned above include: the 16+1 platform which facilitates engagement with countries from Central and Eastern Europe; the Community of Latin America and Caribbean States; the Forum for Economic and Trade Co-operation between China and the Portuguese-speaking Countries, often referred to as Forum Macao; as well as the China–Arab States Cooperation Forum.

⁴ The Global Security Initiative (GSI) was a recurrent theme at the 2024 BXF, with an event on the first day being entirely dedicated to it.

⁵ Russia is not included in Canada's conceptualization of the Indo-Pacific region. Such an omission, however, is questionable given Russia's importance, especially from a security and defence perspective, in the North Pacific which Canada identifies as its 'neighbourhood' bordering both the Arctic and North America.

⁶ Such concerns are the most likely reason for the noticeable absence of commentary about the U.S. in the IPS, as Canada framed this document as its own foreign policy approach to the region and one not overtly influenced by others. That said, the United States remains pivotal in Canadian self-interest calculations. See MacDonald and Vance, 2021.

⁷ This reality further complicates predictions of American strategic retrenchment under the current administration as it does not simply reside on an inter-regional level (i.e. retrenching from Europe, and possibly the Middle East, to focus on the IPR and the Americas) but also exists at the intra-regional level (i.e. retrenching from diplomacy and soft power pursuits in the IPR while simultaneously augmenting an increased military presence there as well).

⁸ For an overview of the varied approaches to and interpretations of national 'One-China' policies see Chong 2023. For a distinctly Canadian viewpoint on this see Simon 2025.

⁹ Led by Richard Fadden, former national security adviser to the prime minister; Martin Green, former Privy Council Office assistant secretary to the Cabinet; and Guy Thibault, former vice chief of the defense staff, other attendees reportedly included: Gordon Venner, former associate deputy minister with the Department of National Defence; retired vice-admiral Mark Norman, former commander of the Royal Canadian Navy; retired lieutenant-general André Deschamps, former commander of the Royal Canadian Air Force; as well as Ian Burney, former Canadian ambassador to Japan. A concrete example of just such a new security building measure is Ottawa's recent decision to post a cyber attaché in Taiwan to deepen co-operation in combatting computer hacking and disinformation, a significant amount of which originates from China. See, The Globe and Mail, 2024b.

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