

A View from the West

Interview with Dr. James Boutilier

Brett Witthoef

After almost five decades of public service, first with Royal Roads Military College, then with Maritime Forces Pacific, Dr. James Boutilier retired on 30 October 2019. Over the course of his long and influential career, Dr. Boutilier was instrumental in educating future Canadian Armed Forces leaders and highlighting the importance of the Indo-Pacific region by serving as Special Advisor to 12 Commanders of Maritime Forces Pacific. Ahead of his retirement, Dr. Boutilier's staffer sat down with him to discuss how the Canadian military and Indo-Pacific region have evolved over his career. (The interview has been edited for clarity and flow.)

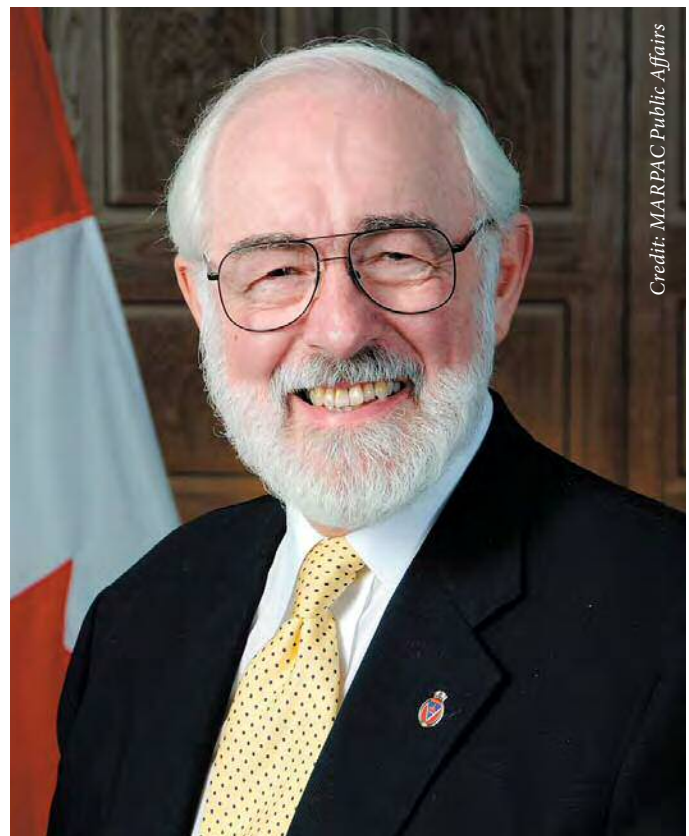
How did you begin your career studying the Indo-Pacific region?

After completing a PhD in History at the University of London in 1969, I began my professorial career with a brief stint in Fiji, and my focus was on the Pacific Islands. Even after I left Fiji in 1971, I continued to conduct research on Oceania and I am – so far as I know – one of the very few people whose career has spanned both Oceania and Asia. After roughly 17 years of researching and writing on the Pacific Islands, I began to devote more of my attention to Asia in the late 1980s. By that time, the rise of China was being recognized as an inescapable phenomenon, and the Pacific Islands were becoming more marginal in terms of great power competition.

When did you join the public service?

My first public appointment was as an assistant professor in the History and Political Economy Department at Royal Roads Military College (RRMC), where I began teaching in September 1971. At the time, RRMC was a two-year institution that was meant to prepare students for further studies at the Royal Military College in Kingston. Moreover, RRMC was primarily focused on science and engineering subjects, and while students were expected to round out their educations with humanities and social studies classes, those classes were sometimes an afterthought. When I first arrived at RRMC, there was one European history course, and I taught 95 to 100 science and engineering students who took the course somewhat involuntarily each year. This was pretty difficult going for them, given the demands of their core program; and many thought that history was peripheral to their main studies.

I should also note that my initial foray at RRMC was difficult going for me as well, given my professorial ambitions.



A portrait of Dr. James Boutilier.

For example, I assigned the 99 students in my first class two essays each for their course assignments. As anyone with basic arithmetic knows, 99 times two is 198, and 198 times 45 minutes to grade each essay means about 150 hours of marking! As a result, I graded for at least four hours a day, five days a week, in order to accomplish this Herculean task, and was careful never to make this mistake again!

How did Royal Roads evolve over the years?

When RRMC became a four-year, degree-granting institution in 1975, faculty were added to all the non-science departments. The program was still very conventional in that courses focused on Western and European issues, so I lobbied in the early 1990s for increased coverage of Asia. I taught courses on the Pacific including the 1905 Russo-Japanese War, Asia in the 20th century and contemporary defence and security in Asia. If I recall correctly, those courses were the only ones on Asia offered in the Canadian military education system at the time. I also initiated a plan that was unique in the military college system: offering a night-time course. This evening course enabled not only the RRMC cadets to take the class, if they so desired,



Commander of the Royal Canadian Navy, Vice-Admiral Ron Lloyd, gives a keynote speech at the 2018 Maritime Security Challenges conference spearheaded by Dr. Boutilier.

but also permitted staff from nearby Maritime Forces Pacific (MARPAF) to attend as well. This was an interesting exercise, and the result – among other things – was that I was later asked to brief a Canadian parliamentary committee, which was soliciting commentary for the 1994 defence White Paper, on the latest security threats in Asia.

The MARPAF commander of the day, Rear-Admiral Dick Waller, asked me to travel with him to San Diego to give testimony at a parliamentary fact-finding mission.

I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge that I have had the great pleasure of teaching many RRMCC students over the years who have gone on to senior command positions. Despite the small size of the student body, RRMCC punched well above its weight, producing Canadian Armed Forces luminaries such as the current Chief of the Defence Staff (CDS) General Jonathan Vance, previous CDS General Walt Natynczyk, former Commander of the Royal Canadian Navy Vice-Admiral Ron Lloyd, and, of course, several members of the eminent Greenwood RCN family.

How else did you help raise awareness of the Indo-Pacific region?

In 1971, alongside Dr. Fong Woon, I helped establish what is now known as the Pacific and Asian Studies Department at the University of Victoria (UVic). This program began as a single year-long multi-disciplinary course on Asia writ large, and Fong and I invited a range of professors from different UVic departments to contribute, pro bono, as a means of offering this Asia course. There was material on Japan, Southeast Asia, the Pacific Islands and cultural coverage of the region to give an introduction to Asia. Slowly, through the 1970s, that program attracted more students, and UVic decided to create a Centre for Pacific



HMCS Toronto leads the USS George Washington carrier strike group in the Arabian Gulf on 3 June 2004. With their multi-purpose capabilities, the Halifax-class frigates have become regular escorts for American carrier groups.

and Oriental Studies, and appointed Professor Jan Walls as the director. The Centre eventually morphed into the current Pacific and Asian Studies Department with its own professors and staff, and I was an adjunct professor there from 1971 to 1995, when I left RRMC.

How did you come to join the Royal Canadian Navy?

Despite its value, RRMC came under the threat of closure several times over the years, and eventually this threat came true in the mid-1990s. In 1995, RRMC closed and I took a year without pay to help establish what is now Royal Roads University, during which time Rear-Admiral Bruce Johnston asked me to join his staff at MARPAC as a policy advisor. His argument was that he had spent the majority of his career in Ottawa and Halifax, and consequently knew little about Asia, and thus needed assistance in understanding the region. At the time, there were some serious reservations in Ottawa about having a policy advisor on the coast, as Ottawa alone formulated policy. However, Rear-Admiral Johnston pushed the appointment through, and I began work at MARPAC in July 1996.

I should note that my joining MARPAC was far from my first encounter with the navy. As a young man, I joined the RCN Reserves as a cadet and subsequently served as a navigating officer from 1956 to 1964, and I served in the latter capacity with the Royal Navy Reserve from 1964 to 1969 while studying in London.

How have the Indo-Pacific region, and Canada's views of the region, changed over the years?

When I became engaged in the study of Asia in the late 1980s, Canada was reasonably active in the region, particularly in Southeast Asia. For example, there was a Canada-Association of Southeast Asian Nations centre in Singapore, there were Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade (DFAIT)-funded non-governmental organizations, including the Canadian Consortium on Asia-Pacific Security (CANCAPS), and DFAIT Minister Joe Clark had a genuine interest in Asia and the Pacific Islands, which was a rarity. When the Cold War ended, Canada began to lose its way in Asia. While organizations like CANCAPS continued through the 1990s, funding began to dry up, and CANCAPS eventually ceased to function. There was an international non-governmental organization in which Canada was a member, the Council for Security Cooperation (CSCAP), currently located in Kuala Lumpur at the Institute of Strategic and International Studies (ISIS) Malaysia, which was also funded by DFAIT and held regular meetings in Canada, and Canadian representatives went to Asia to attend CSCAP meetings. After the turn of the century, funding

again dried up, and Canada's representation in CSCAP ended. That meant that the two main organizations for Canadian Track 2 diplomacy in Asia were no more.

The years of Jean Chrétien and Paul Martin were characterized by high-profile Team Canada ventures into Asia, particularly to China. It is not clear what the Team Canada ventures achieved; they mostly appeared to be theatre designed to maintain existing linkages. A case in point is that, while the overall size of Asian economic activity has grown since then, Canada's share has remained the same. Canada has failed to penetrate the Asian markets to the degree that we would have liked. This could be because Canada has few world-class firms, but a lack of vision and energy toward Asia by successive governments is also to blame. A failure to engage consistently has worked to Canada's disadvantage. There has also been a failure to appreciate the links among trade, diplomacy and security: showing interest and involvement in regional security issues will yield more receptivity to trade issues than focusing solely on trade. Canada probably should have spent more effort on the small and middle economies of Southeast Asia – in addition to Japan and South Korea – for greater returns.

I always characterized the period from the 1990s onward as the Rip Van Winkle years: as the importance of Asia grew, Canada was asleep. The dramatic downturn in several Asian economies during the 1997 Asian financial crisis may have discouraged greater attention to the region and, along with political challenges in Europe – especially the then-Yugoslavia – Ottawa focused its



Perhaps few signs are more clear of Asia's increasing importance to Canada than the signs at Vancouver International Airport where Chinese shares equal space with Canada's official languages and other Indo-Pacific region languages rotate through the digital screen on the right.



The Five Eyes community will become ever more important to Canada's role in the Indo-Pacific. Here, HMNZS Te Kaha, one of New Zealand's two frigates, is seen October 2018 receiving its midlife upgrade at Esquimalt, BC, by Lockheed Martin Canada.

attention elsewhere than Asia. After 9/11, the US 'global war on terror' and Canada's participation in the war in Afghanistan both served to reinforce the natural indifference in Ottawa toward Asia. The irony is that this was the very time that China in particular began its stellar economic growth. This growth, however, coincided with the Stephen Harper government which was deeply antithetical to China. Bit by bit, Russia also began to resurrect, which raised arguments to revitalize the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and renew Canadian commitments in the Atlantic

With the 2008-2009 global economic meltdown, which created profound economic turbulence, the view grew that Canada needed to diversify away from its traditional areas (trade with the United States was about 87 per cent of Canada's total at the time) to reduce vulnerability. On the one hand, there was a powerful impetus to diversify, but on the other, there were major distractions (Afghanistan, NATO obligations), and we entered what I call the Potemkin era, when Canada was superficially dedicated to Asia, but this rhetorical dedication was not supported

by material resources. At the same time, the navy, one of Canada's principal agents of influence in Asia, was laying the groundwork for the mid-life refit of the frigates, which meant that the RCN was unable to engage in Asia to the extent that it would have wished.

The Harper government eventually awoke to the importance of Asia and China, but this was not a sustained offensive, and what interest was shown in Asia was mainly exhibited by the business community. At the same time, slowly and steadily, the 'Asianization' of key urban areas – Toronto, Vancouver, Ottawa and Calgary – began to change the provincial and federal political landscape. In broader terms, western Canada exerted a greater influence in the national electoral process, so the importance of Asia became more difficult to ignore at the domestic level, never mind the international level. I would argue, parenthetically, that it is part of the Canadian DNA to be all things to all people, and Canada has had real trouble prioritizing where to place its attention and effort.

How do you think the Royal Canadian Navy sees the Indo-Pacific region?

There's a new generation of naval leadership attuned to the importance of defence and security in what's currently called the Indo-Pacific region. The profound change of tone in China since 2012 argues powerfully for yet more attention to the regional security dynamic. In the post-Afghanistan, post-mid-life refit era, the RCN has committed itself to a more robust engagement program in the region. This is, of course, easier said than done given the distances involved and the long line of requests for the RCN's services, from NATO to the Caribbean, which take the RCN's limited assets to the ends of the world. We are seeing a greater receptivity from the US Navy (USN) to work with allies, and greater willingness from the Japanese to engage with the RCN and Royal Australian Navy. At the same time, there are mounting anxieties about China's end game in the South China Sea and its Belt and Road Initiative, including the emergence of proto-naval ports in Asia.

Changes in Asia have been so profound that – my work notwithstanding – senior leadership would have been forced inevitably to pay more attention to the region. In the 1990s, the USN invited Canada first to supplement – then outright replace – USN vessels in carrier battle groups. This was the period when the USN was strongly advancing the 1,000-ship construct; when the Americans came to the major realization that they couldn't adequately address the complex array of modern maritime security all alone, and encouraged Canada to participate more. Canada has received massive returns in its close



The biennial Maritime Security Challenges (MSC) conferences in Victoria, BC, have become world-renown. Here, naval theorist and MSC regular attendee Dr. Geoffrey Till (left) speaks with Dr. Boutilier in the closing panel of MSC 2018.

cooperation with the USN, from access to missile data, to mid-ocean refueling, to access to invaluable intelligence.

What needs to be done going forward to improve Canada's participation in the Indo-Pacific region?

Ottawa has failed abjectly to understand the new security dynamic and to articulate clear foreign policy statements which adequately capture new realities. For example, as Jonathan Manthorpe notes in his book, *Claws of the Panda*, China has become more predatory and problematic. What does this mean for Canada and its security commitments? What should Canada's position be if there were to be hostilities toward Taiwan from the mainland?

Chinese influence operations in Canada and in like-minded countries like Australia and New Zealand have served as a wake-up call. Now, more than ever, Canada should increase cooperation, starting with the Five Eyes community (Australia, Canada, New Zealand, the UK and the United States), and including others such as France, Japan and South Korea. To be fair, China has legitimate great power ambitions, but its behaviour is deeply disturbing, and its values are clearly antithetical to Canadian values. China isn't necessarily keen to start a war, but it will achieve its objectives by other means. Russian President Vladimir Putin and Chinese President Xi Jinping have operated from the same playbook in the Crimea and the South China Sea, and Canada needs to give more thought

to its position in the face of these provocations. Canada should be alert to these challenges, as the West either hangs together or hangs separately.

What would you list as among your greatest career accomplishments?

I have had the great pleasure to provide advice on Asian security dynamics to several Ministers and Deputy Ministers of National Defence, including Minister Harjit Sajjan, at the Shangri-La Dialogue annual Defence Ministers' Summit in Singapore, over the years. I have also had the pleasure of sailing in many MARPAC ships during their Asian deployments. This gave me the opportunity to brief ships' companies, and host academic roundtables between Canadian officials and local security experts on board those ships while in port.

The Maritime Security Challenges conference series is one way I have attempted to generate greater awareness of Asia and encourage key regional actors to come to Canada. Over the decades, I've established a reputation in Asia that has worked to Canada's advantage, as Asia is a part of the world where age, status and reputation still matter a great deal. I've had the good fortune of getting to know a great many decision-makers, and I hope that this has reinforced in their minds an appreciation of Canada's commitment to Asia. 🍷