# Interview – Stéphanie Martel

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Stéphanie Martel is an Associate Professor in the Department of Political Studies at Queen's University. Her research on multilateral security and regional security governance, and the role of narratives in world politics focuses on Southeast Asia and the Indo-Pacific. She represents Canada at various Indo-Pacific Security dialogues, including the ASEAN Regional Forum's Eminent and Expert Persons Group and the Council for Security Cooperation in the Asia-Pacific. Her book *Enacting the Security Community: ASEAN's Never-Ending Story* was published in 2022 by Stanford University Press. Her research has been featured in several peer-reviewed journals such as International Studies Quarterly, International Affairs, Global Studies Quarterly, European Journal of International Relations, International Studies Perspectives and the Pacific Review among many others.

**Where do you see the most exciting research/debates happening in your field?**

I am particularly interested in problem- and context-driven theoretical discussions that help us think through how social agents engage in world politics on a day-to-day basis. Given that my work is situated at the intersection of global security and global governance, what I find especially fruitful right now are debates around the interaction or overlaps between norms, discourse, and practices – how we parse those distinctions out, the extent to which they matter, and how thinking this through may help address, and hopefully resolve, tensions in meta-theoretical commitments. My recent work on multilateral diplomacy in Southeast Asia (and more specifically, within and around the Association of Southeast Asian Nations), which is informed by my own inclinations towards the study of discourse and narratives, offers a modest contribution to these conversations. I owe it to my ongoing collaboration with Aarie Glas (Northern Illinois University), a practice-oriented scholar. I feel like we both benefitted from engaging "the other side" (though neither of us necessarily sees things that way) openly and generously, with the intent to draw from each other's insights, skills, and angles, from both our convergences and disagreements, to enrich how we approach the empirical context and problems we're equally invested in understanding better. This interest also informs my work, in collaboration with several other colleagues (Jennifer Mustapha, Sarah Sharma, Stéfanie von Hlatky, Yolande Bouka, and Emma Fingler) on how the Women, Peace and Security agenda is regionalized across various multilateral institutions (NATO, the AU, and ASEAN).

Yet the most exciting area for me research-wise, which is the focus of my next book, stems from the attention scholars, but also practitioners and observers of world politics, give to narratives, so suddenly. Like many of my colleagues, I used to find it necessary to make a very strong case to convince peers and students of the importance of words, discourse, and story-telling. It was the initial impulse behind my work on security community-building in ASEAN, which is apparent not only in my book but in a previously published article in *International Studies Quarterly*. But it's obvious now that these things are so much more than "mere rhetoric" reflecting the proverbial "gap between words and deeds." The main challenge for those sharing similar inclinations is now to explain not whether but *how* the power of words matters, the specific kind of explanatory power it holds, and the methodological choices (and dilemmas) that come into play when the goal is to take discourse seriously. The central conversation in IR right now is about struggles over international order, whether it involves great or 'not so great' (in the material sense of the term) powers. Since a lot of that struggle is actually discursive, I feel like the discipline owes itself to better listen to those who've been saying "it's the discourse, stupid!" all along, and also have a great deal of experience working with the tools needed to make sense of its power.

**How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?**

I think the most radical shift in perspective for me occurred when I discovered that the pursuit of what we call "security" was not only deeply contextual, but elusive, and that it would always be. I had never thought of myself as particularly theoretically-inclined, although I had always been interested in how people make sense of the world in diverse ways, and can interpret the same event from radically different perspectives. So running by happenstance into the world of critical security studies as I was working on the geopolitics of drugs in Southeast Asia during an interdisciplinary MA in France was earth-shattering for me, and it's what led me to IR (which I had until then perceived as a fundamentally "mainstream" discipline). It all made so much sense in a way that theory never had before. If I have to name a single "who", I'd probably have to say Lene Hansen. Not because her *Security as Practice* is the first of the genre I read, but because it's the one that stimulated my thinking the most –and I'm certainly not the only one. Additionally, since Vincent Pouliot is the one who introduced me to this work at the start of my PhD, he gets part of the credit too.

**How would you respond to critiques that question the need for multilateral institutions given their perceived inability to prevent regional conflicts?**

The short and easy answer is, well, what else is there? It is of course perfectly understandable to be disappointed by multilateral institutions. I mean just look at how they're handling the climate crisis. However, it is also incredibly convenient. First, because it allows other actors (states, in particular) to shift the blame elsewhere. Second, because having to not only acknowledge that statist and other top-down forms of governance are maybe not as apt as we'd hoped they would be at fostering the kind of solutions this moment of "polycrisis" begs for, but to actually do something about it, collectively and cooperatively, is very hard. Third, because it's so easy for those of us who grew up in or lived through the "post-Cold War era" to have put all of those (naive) expectations into the UN system, the EU, etc. only to realize that actually, we continue to live in a power-driven world that is not so easily transcended in favour of the global collective good. And before you call me a realist, I'm not predominantly talking about material power here; I'm talking about all these power dynamics, symbolic, discursive, and otherwise that have such significance on how the world (and multilateralism!) goes round, that many have always known are fundamental due to their lived experiences with various, intersecting systems of oppression and discrimination, but have been rendered invisible and were ignored by design.

I think we at least owe it to those multilateral institutions (and the diplomats, bureaucrats, and other individuals that allow them to exist) to seriously acknowledge how hard the job is, but also the many less glamorous things they accomplish that fly under the radar and outside the media cycle. If we recognize their potential but then choose to not pay attention to them outside of summitry rituals and photo-ops among world leaders (which isn't where most of the work gets done), then we don't really have the right to complain about them too much.

**In your recently published book, you wrote about ASEAN's aspirations to create a 'security community'. How does a 'security community' differ from a traditional security organisation?**

A security community is premised upon the realization of an ideal that sustains the development of security cooperation, and leads its members to recognize each other as part of a "we" (either in aspiration or actuality), not just as a result of a convergence of material interests, but as part of their very identity. Of course, we can think of several defence and security organizations that might meet this criterion or be in a process of doing so. It's also important to remind people that security communities are not necessarily multilateral organizations, although multilateral organizations typically involve some aspiration of becoming something else than transactional, and developing a collective identity. This is certainly the case for ASEAN and its champions. However, beyond an attempt to assess whether ASEAN (or any multilateral organization) fits a somewhat consensual definition of the concept grounded in the renunciation of war as a legitimate means of dispute settlement, my book starts with the fact that ASEAN calls itself a security community. It then looks at what it means by it and how it got to claim this status, what this branding exercise involves, and to what effect. Its security community-building enterprise is specific, it's not only or even mainly about the absence of war, but a whole range (and ever-expanding list) of security concerns, and that

to me is interesting. ASEAN might never actually make it to the end of what I refer to as a "never-ending" journey (unless, of course, the journey simply comes to a full stop while en route…), but insofar as it remains committed to that goal as it has for 50+ years now despite being supposedly at risk of unravelling all the time, a few things do happen on the way that deserve our attention, and the way I suggest we make sense of them is by, again, taking discourse seriously. Unpacking that is what I (try to) do in the book.

**You have written extensively on the identity of ASEAN. What goes into a multilateral organisation developing and maintaining an 'identity'?**

Identity formation is something you do every day, otherwise it disappears. It requires visible (but also hearable, readable…) expression, through symbols, rituals, and a whole lot of speech. Identity is something that is *performed*, whether you actually believe in it or not is not the point, though it certainly helps drawing your audience in. It is also constantly in flux. This is what leads ASEAN to constantly reinvent itself through new mantras, catchphrases, and unattainable objectives that allow it to keep moving. Forward? Arguably. To where? We don't really know, because the end goal is vague, it changes, and it keeps being pushed back. My favourite example of this is the goal to make the ASEAN community "drug-free," partly because I started to look into all that stuff from a regional geopolitics of drugs angle as a MA student, but mostly because it's so clearly an impossible one, on top of many other inherent contradictions. There's a whole chapter about this in the book if you are interested.

**What is the significance of discourse in global politics especially when it comes to security issues?**

It is through discourse that we make sense of the world, how we bring social reality into being, and figure out what security is. You can say that for a whole lot of stuff in world politics of course, but security is probably the one that holds the most devastating power over people's lives. It is the basic, primordial thing we strive for even when we forget about it; invoking it (or more accurately, its loss, even potential) activates a sense of priority, urgency, danger, and a kind of fight-or-flight response that you don't see in other domains of sociopolitical life. Even the most privileged among us can never feel completely secure. It's why major powers invest so much money into building a nuclear arsenal that could kill us all so many times over and that they hope to never use. It's why we continue to think and behave as if the state was the ultimate, natural form of political authority over human societies. It's why we exclude, and thus how we build our very identity. Security involves a form of radical othering that is necessarily grounded in language and discourse. But ultimately, it has no real, essential, palpable meaning outside of the language we use to make it come alive. So I don't think there's anything that allows us to make more concrete sense of the power of words in world politics and social life.

**You have represented Canada at various international policy forums, particularly on Indo-Pacific Security. What are some of your key takeaways regarding Canada's perceived role in the region?**

Canada continues to have a problem in convincing others of its relevance to regional affairs, and for good reason. And the problem is not only that it fails to match words and deeds, but that it has not even found the right words yet. At least not for the purpose of engaging regional (or other international) audiences. On the Indo-Pacific specifically, but really, on its foreign and security policy role in any context globally, Canada's attempts to make the case that "it's back" in any meaningful way have not succeeded. And before you think I'm being harsh (I am, but it comes from a place of love…), I must say that I have only the utmost respect and admiration for our foreign service in the region, who are very aware of the stakes and solutions required, but have very limited room to manoeuvre, and limited resources, in trying to reverse a much-established perception that Canada is a fair-weather, not so significant, not so committed friend of (most of) the region. The recent release of our Indo-Pacific Strategy as the latest wagon on board of a very long train of allies and partners has not changed that yet, unfortunately, because a lot of what we say about it in and around "the region," whether we call it Southeast Asia, Asia-Pacific, or Indo-Pacific, sounds hollow and tone-deaf to regional audiences we're trying to convince of our value added. This is the main reason why we've failed to find the support needed to our bid of joining key institutions like the East Asia Summit and the ADMM-Plus.

We're not even able to show up consistently at meetings we *do* have access to, and that has not gone unnoticed… In addition, when we do show up, the perception that, after a period of constructive engagement in regional dialogues in

the 1990s, we've basically turned into a mini-US or Australia's distant (and poorer) cousin, has not yet been reversed. And whether the Canadian government is actually committed to changing this sentiment is unclear, including for me. It requires a difficult balancing act between conflicting priorities with various levels of importance for Ottawa and the Canadian public. And money we don't have or are not interested in spending the way it needs to be for us to meet our stated ambitions. The Indo-Pacific Strategy itself merges a still-birth China policy that very much reflects the zero-sum strategic interests of our Southern neighbour in maintaining global and regional primacy, with a set of cooperation-oriented goals where Canadian interests and commitments to a liberal international order overlap with those in the region we deem "like-minded." That's a very hard thing to pull off in a policy document, let alone in practice, and in a way that can make sense to a majority of Canadians who are not especially knowledgeable or even interested in such a far-away part of the world, at a time when many struggle to make ends meet. So you can guess how things might be going when it comes to actual implementation, although I do hope I'm wrong and am committed to doing my very modest part to help.

**What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars of International Relations?**

You cannot see the future, so don't try to. By this I mean that it's not worth your time to speculate about trends in world politics 5, 10, or 25 years from now, or in the discipline itself. Figure out what makes you tick, and then work on honing both area and/or issue expertise as well as general (including transferable) skills that will allow you to translate what you learn in ways that resonate with as many people as possible, across divides. Whether that leads you to academia, a policy job, the NGO world, the private sector, or sea piracy, it will prove worth it in ways you don't suspect. So be curious, and don't be afraid to follow your gut. And perhaps more importantly, be kind (to yourself and others) while you do all that.