

**Global order, U.S.-China relations and Chinese behaviour: The ground is shifting,
Canada must adjust**

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Abstract

Three profound shifts are coming to head in the 21st century: shifts in the global order, shifts in the U.S.-China relationship and shifts in Chinese behaviour. These shifts are compelling Canada to reframe its relations with China. First, at the global level, the changing balance of power is leading us towards an era of polycentric global governance. Second, there is deepening antagonism in U.S.-China relations. Third, China's international posture has become more forthright. Canada has yet to adjust, but it is well placed to develop a global world view in sync with 21st century realities. The Canada-China relationship needs to be transformed into an adaptive, modular and strategic relationship, in our dealings with China at the global level, triangulating our relationship with the U.S. and China, and within the confines of our bilateral relationship. This paper tackles each area in turn.

Keywords: Canada, China, foreign policy, U.S., global order, power transition, public opinion

Introduction

Since the middle of the 20th century, Canada has operated under the twin advantage of an international balance of power dominated by our neighbour and closest partner, as well as a global order in large part constituted of values and principles close to our own, and in which we have exerted a sizeable amount of influence. In the 21st century however, three profound shifts are coming to head: shifts in the balance of power and global order, shifts in the U.S.-China relationship and shifts in Chinese behaviour. These shifts are compelling Canada to reframe its approach to foreign policy more generally, and in particular its relations with China.¹

First, at the global level, the rise of China and other emerging economies are changing the configurations of power underpinning much of the global order. The absence of any one dominant power across all areas of global affairs means that we are entering an era of polycentric global governance, where imperfectly delineated areas of the global order respond to their own sets of dynamics and are home to distinct interest coalitions. Second, the end of the Obama presidency brought with it a hardening of positions towards China in the United States, of which President Trump's approach to China is but an expression. There is deepening antagonism in U.S.-China relations across partisan lines, even if a variety of outcomes remain possible. Third, China's posture has become more forthright internationally and it is set to play a determining, albeit variable, role in almost all global issues, sometimes aligned with Canadian interests, sometimes not.

Canada has yet to adjust to these changing geopolitical realities, but it is well placed to develop an innovative and sophisticated global world view in synch with 21st century realities. As a result of these deep transformations, and in order to develop an adaptive, modular, yet strategic approach to China, Canadian foreign policy needs to go beyond customary binary normative assessments at these three levels: beyond a diagnosis of the global order as liberal or illiberal; beyond a conception of international partnerships as like-minded or non-like-minded; and beyond binary evaluations of Chinese behaviour as good or bad.

Shifts in the global order

The global balance of power is shifting, and the U.S.-led global order is contested. We are in a period of transition to a post-hegemonic, polycentric world. In this scenario, different, not neatly delineated areas of the global order—in terms of geographies, stakeholders and issue areas—will increasingly respond to their own sets of multilevel dynamics. China (and other dominant powers) will play a wide range of roles across global issues, at times obstructionist or disruptive, at times innovating or asking for reform and at other times supportive of existing institutions.

The dominant narrative in North America is that China is threatening the Global Liberal Order (commonly conceptualised as composed of international organisations such as the IMF and the WTO, open markets, and liberal values such as sovereignty and democracy). Weaved from a U.S. perspective, this narrative at times conflates normative and power considerations, global public goods and American interests.

Seen from the rest of the world, the narrative is more nuanced. A variety of scholars, both within and outside the U.S., have argued that American debates about the preservation of the Global Liberal Order too often evacuate global power relations.² Others have pointed to the existence of a variety of global orders, rather than one.³ If we accept that shifting balance of power will lead to change in global institutions, a more nuanced assessment of existing global institutions, their histories and embedded power relations is a necessary step in going beyond all or nothing perspectives on reforming global institutions.

There is a divergence of diagnostics on the key challenges facing the global order and ways forward, mostly, but not exclusively, between developing and developed countries. Responding to this discomfort, Joseph Nye recently suggested it would be “wise to discard the terms “liberal” and “American” and refer instead to the prospects of an “open international and rules-based international order.”⁴

At the global level, many have argued that President Trump has irremediably damaged multilateralism. The U.S. President has indeed damaged global trust in

American support for multilateral endeavours, but multilateralism may very well survive the Trump presidency. In the end, there could be one silver lining in the current U.S. President's disruptive behaviour: it has at once created momentum for the overdue reform of international institutions and put China in a position where it may be more willing to compromise on certain key issues.

Implications for Canada-China relations

The current dominant narrative depicting China as a threat to the global order creates a hunkering down mentality and is not conducive to seeing the global order's limitations and need for reform or to engaging system outsiders in a constructive way.

Canada needs to adjust to a 21st century state of affairs and learn quickly how to operate and wield maximum influence in this newly configured global arena. For this, one must go beyond binary analyses of the global order as liberal or illiberal and recognize that frustrations concerning the status quo globally come from a wide variety of backgrounds. A return to a pre-2008 Global Financial Crisis U.S.-led global order is no longer feasible and cannot be a workable goal.

A more productive way to approach challenges in global governance would be to conceptualise the global order into three components towards which Canada can develop distinct engagement approaches. First, there are components of the global order that need reform. Canada can be honest and open-minded about this and work with emerging economies including China on reforming existing international organisations. We are better placed than the U.S. to engage on this front. For instance, we can agree with other developing countries that the tradition of U.S.-nominated World Bank Presidents and EU-nominated IMF Presidents may need to give way to a more inclusive model.

Second, there are components of the global order that are in Canada's interest to preserve and that Canada can choose to continue to defend. Against the backdrop of the rise of various challenges to socio-political principles of democracy, individual rights and freedoms and inclusivity, in the form of the rise of populism, authoritarian models of governance, rising sentiments of exclusion and democratic setbacks, it can be the legitimate aspiration of Canadian foreign policy to advocate for their advancement, at the same time as working to strengthen their foundation at home. Here, Canada can be

insistent, while being attuned to the difference between arguments based on self-interest and those based on “the common good”.

Third, there are components of the global order that need creating. Here, Canada can be innovative and contribute to deliberations on the future of global governance (e.g. governance of the Internet, data,⁵ Artificial Intelligence, 5G, fresh water resources management, migration, refugee education⁶, the Arctic, etc.).

In each of these categories, there will be instances where Canada can work with China and other instances where Canada can build different coalitions. Canadian foreign policy has to be nimbler, accept that there is no permanent coalition of “like-mindeds” across all issue-areas, and work outside of comfortable arenas, at different levels of government and with civil society. At the global level, different issue-areas will require different kinds of partnerships. Canada can be aligned with most Chinese stakeholders in the fight against climate change, aligned with some Chinese stakeholders on the reform of the WTO and the defense of multilateralism, and not aligned with many Chinese stakeholders on the governance of the Internet.

This means that Canada must transform its approach to China into an adaptive, modular relationship, one that modifies character and tone across different issue-areas, but rests on a strategic vision. This does not mean a transactional, or ad-hoc, foreign policy. It is strategic and deeply principled to work closely with China on climate change. Deciding to work on climate change is the primary decision, as it were. The need to work with China follows from it. Working to revitalize multilateralism is also a primary policy choice, and it can lead to Canadian policy partly aligning with the U.S and partly aligning with China, in different ways. Temporarily bypassing American (or Chinese) partners (such as in 2018-2019 meetings on WTO reform),⁷ should only be done when absolutely necessary, and with the aim of bringing both in at a later stage (as should be the case for CPTPP).

Canadian convening capacity, soft power and partnership networks should be harnessed towards the reform of international organisations and towards engaging with China to elicit support for these reforms at the same time as encouraging necessary compromises. If momentum is preserved, enough progress can be made to prepare the

ground for Chinese and American-supported reforms to be pushed through when the right conditions are present.

2. Shifts in U.S. – China relations

Across the developed world, most notably in the U.S., we have seen a serious hardening of views on China based on an emerging consensus that the long-standing engagement policy, predicated on the gradual liberalization of the Chinese polity, economy and society, has failed. This is accompanied by a return to economic nationalism.

Of note, an article by Kurt Campbell and Ely Ratner, former senior Obama administration advisers,⁸ where they argue: “The record is increasingly clear that Washington once again put too much faith in its power to shape China's trajectory. All sides of the policy debate erred: free traders and financiers who foresaw inevitable and increasing openness in China, integrationists who argued that Beijing's ambitions would be tamed by greater interaction with the international community, and hawks who believed that China's power would be abated by perpetual American primacy.”⁹ See Johnston for a powerful rebuttal.¹⁰

As a result of this shift, mainstream positions on U.S.-China have narrowed and shifted significantly, and now range from “smart competition” at the engagement end,¹¹ to discussions of “containment” and “conflict,” which have become commonplace. Phrases such as “strategic rivalry” and “decoupling” have become middle of the road.

The current president may exhibit idiosyncratic behaviour: the administration irritates and challenges traditional allies, fosters uncertainty (making China less likely to agree to structural compromises), its means are poorly selected (tariffs) and its endgame is uncertain. But the current U.S. administration's approach to China is buoyed by deep bipartisan support. We have passed a threshold: no matter the outcome of the next U.S. presidential elections, the future has been qualitatively altered. A measure of decoupling is currently taking place, what remains to be seen is the shape and breadth of decoupling

tendencies. Yet, the future is not predetermined and a variety of scenarios remain possible at this point. A key risk lies in self-fulfilling prophecies.

This deepening concern is finding some echo in Canada following the Meng Wanzhou affair. U.S. government pressures on Canadian China policy have started with the inclusion of section 32.10 in the USMCA, and continue over the question of Huawei in 5G. A key question for Canadian foreign policy going forward will be how to carve room for maneuver given the triangular nature of the U.S.-China-Canada relationship.

Implications for Canada-China relations

Given deepening U.S.-China antagonism, there is a danger that Canada is siphoned into a higher-level sharp conflict of hearts and minds against China, which would not serve Canadian interests. Parallels with the Cold War are not helpful, given the deep entanglement of U.S. and Chinese economies, finance and people. Yet, given the shifting geopolitical environment and the disintegration of China engagement rationales south of the border, the foundations of a sustainable China policy have to be reassessed for Canada.

Engagement rationales need not be predicated on a likability heuristic or on rapid socio-economic and political liberalization, have routinely exaggerated developed countries' capacity to influence Chinese domestic politics and underestimated the extent to which China has contributed to, as well as been profoundly shaped by, globalization. A China policy can be interest-based as well as aspirational, and need not depend on China becoming a liberal democracy, even as it seeks to empower progressive forces in China.

Given the narrower room for maneuver resulting from the deepening China-U.S. rivalry, nuance, precision and clarity have become ever more so important. Gone are the days when one could talk loosely of engaging or disengaging from China. There is now a prerogative to explain when, in which areas, how and why.

Canada managed to negotiate room for maneuver in times of non-alignment with U.S. preferences in the past. Canadian policy-makers should draw from these experiences and work to actively create and utilize space for Canadian foreign policy independence on China, wherever possible. Room for maneuver can be created by fragmenting

sensitive decisions into smaller, more manageable parts, fostering a nuanced discussion on China with the Canadian public; as well as working with American and other stakeholders on certain difficulties with China (such as on commercial espionage or market access); and working with Chinese and other stakeholders on certain difficulties with the U.S. (such as on climate change or multilateralism).

On 5G and beyond, the negative and positive security implications of profound technological decoupling need to be weighed carefully.¹² Careful, fragmented, interest-based and periodically reviewed Canadian policy responses to this rapidly evolving environment need to be crafted. New technologies are forcing us to reinterpret notions of the Canadian interest and how to protect Canadian institutions, from the security of communications all the way to freedom of speech on social media. The room for maneuver and breadth of access for Huawei and other foreign firms need to be carefully assessed and reassessed on an ongoing basis. Implications for Canadian participation in the Five Eyes network (U.S., U.K., Australia, New Zealand and Canada) need to be considered. Core areas of telecommunications infrastructure and Canadian government contracts are already off-limits to Huawei as per current regulations, but 5G technologies require rethinking those. On the other hand, profound decoupling and the creation of bifurcated telecommunications spheres would also increase security vulnerabilities. As senior Google executives recently argued, tens of millions of Huawei phone users outside of China, including in the U.S., would become more vulnerable in a decoupled world.¹³ The very dynamics associated with decoupling, such as the deep hostility and reduced interdependence that is fostered by it, run the risk of fueling a security dilemma worsening both sides' security. Managed entanglement or managed zones of independence and interdependence (joint research in some fields but not others, etc.) may be the best way to foster enhanced security and may offer Canadians more levers and options going ahead.

It is important to note is that there is often no consensus within China on many issues critical to Canadian interests, such as IP protection. As Canada accomplished in the lead-up to USMCA negotiations engaging with a variety of U.S. partners, there is a need for a granular understanding of where Chinese partners are located on issues of interest to us. Canada ought to leverage promising relationships and open the door for

non-traditional partnerships. On IP for example, we need a sophisticated understanding of which Chinese companies, stakeholders or interest groups are aligned with Canadian views and how to more deeply engage with them.

3. Shifts in Chinese behaviour

Within the span of a couple of decades, China went from an almost complete outsider to the second most dominant economy in the world, the main manufacturer of most goods, the largest consumer of commodities, the largest contributor to global GDP growth, the top 2 import or export market for 56% of countries in the world (including for the U.S., the EU, India, Brazil, Japan, Russia, Nigeria and Canada), the largest emitter of carbon dioxide, the largest consumer of electric vehicles, the largest contributor to reforestation in the world, the second largest military budget and second largest contributor to the UN peacekeeping budget after the U.S.

The advent of China as a global superpower and shaper of the international rules of the game under which we operate is distinctive for Canadian foreign policy because this kind of influence is exercised for the first time by an authoritarian entity home to socio-political principles very different from our own.

Under Xi Jinping, China has become more assertive internationally (although not across all areas, as discussed in Johnston, 2013) and has shifted gears on domestic reforms, continuing forward in some areas and reversing course in others. Some areas have continued to improve in China since 2012, including environmental governance, health governance, socio-economic development, a reduction of crimes that can result in the death penalty, an easing the one-child policy, economic development, gradual opening of capital markets, etc. Other areas have seen clear reversals, including a reestablishment of party control over various spheres of business and society, crackdown on political dissent, the Xinjiang camps, the massive surveillance system, corporate espionage, the targeting of human rights lawyers, etc.

A lack of familiarity with China and Asia among the general public, government and business communities in Canada continues to be an issue. It is fair to say that few

Canadians understand the depth of the outrage in China that what was to follow the arrest of Huawei deputy chairwoman and Chief Financial Officer Meng Wanzhou on December 1, 2018. Gaps in values between Canada and China complicate the relationship. The Meng Wanzhou affair has brought Canada-China relations to their lowest point in decades.

Implications for Canada-China relations

Chinese responses to the Meng Wanzhou affair, including the detention of two Canadian citizens in December 2018, Michael Kovrig and Michael Spavor, as well as the ban on canola, beef and pork exports has had a negative impact on favourability towards China among Canadians, but perhaps not as much as some would expect. Favourability stood at 36% in 2017, was down to 22% in early 2019 and is now back up to 29%, according to a poll conducted by UBC professors Evans and Li in October 2019.¹⁴ At the same time, favourability towards the U.S. stood at 52% in 2017, was down to 36% in February 2019, and is back up to 51% in October 2019. On the Meng affair, 74% of Canadians think Canada is caught in the middle of a conflict between the U.S. and China. Interestingly, support for an FTA with China has remained remarkably stable throughout the last year, at 62% (down from 69% in 2017). The survey also finds that in identifying the top priority for the Canadian government in its relations with China, “promoting human rights” still ranked fourth (11%), as it did in 2017, after “expanding trade and investment” (27%), “furthering cooperation on global issues” (24%), and “protecting Canadian values and institutions at home” (15%). On Huawei, 50% of Canadians think Huawei should not be a major provider to Canada’s 5G system, while 43% think Huawei investments in Canadian universities should be encouraged. 68% of Canadians think Canada can have good relations with China and the U.S. at the same time. In other words, the Canadian public holds nuanced views.

The combination of China’s importance in world affairs and the complications related to divergences in socio-political values means that this will remain one of the most complicated relationships for Canada to navigate going ahead. It also means that Canada should refrain from the temptation to reach for the on/off switch, to escalate and react in one block. Recent fluctuations between “hot” and “cold” approaches to Canada-

China relations have resulted in a lack of baseline continuity over the past 15 years. Official China narratives in Canada have tended to be binary (i.e. “trade vs human rights”), unrefined (i.e. mostly about prosperity or values), and amalgamated (i.e. positive/negative). This is a suboptimal, impractical frame. Canada needs a deeper, more stable rationale for engagement with China. We cannot stop engaging China on climate change issues because we disagree on the governance of the Internet.

This is why Canada needs to evolve towards an adaptive, modular yet strategic relationship with China. In addition to being nimbler, Canada’s China policy also needs to be spirited (resolute about core interests to maintain or reinforce), targeted (no blanket statements), accurate (reflecting reality on the ground, operating with realistic expectations), forward-looking (firmly set in the 21st century) and perceptive (about likely Chinese interpretations).

Downward pressure on general sentiment towards China combined with continued majority support for maintaining a working relationship, the presence of deep people-to-people linkages, support for deepening economic engagement and awareness of China’s importance to the management of most global issues, increase the need for a more complex official China narrative in Canada.

The multifacetedness of China’s roles and the variety of strategic considerations raised by China have rendered usual binary Canadian responses to Chinese behaviour unproductive. Distinct and predictable policy responses to different types of Chinese behaviours that are not aligned with Canadian interests can be developed. Here are four potential categories:

- a) **“Let go”**. There is a category of issues that Canada has to let go of, as they are beyond the remit of foreign policy and are for Chinese people to decide and act upon (municipal governance, local environmental degradation, vaccine scandal, political regime, capital account liberalization, etc.). Here, Chinese people are the legitimate stakeholder and they have agency. They are the masters of their own destiny.
- b) **“Cooperate”**. There is a category of issues where we have to collaborate with China on global solutions (climate change, health crises such as Ebola, macroeconomic

policy coordination) or where we can decide to offer expertise in case of receptivity (rule of law and governance, health, gender, language policy, environment).

- c) **“Firm up”**. There is a category of issues where Chinese behaviour is unacceptable and has a direct impact on Canadian interests (interference, consular cases, commercial espionage, etc.). There we have to be unapologetic, clear, firm, call it out, and act firmly (but with precision and measure, and with a sense of resonance across the Pacific), perhaps to a greater extent than we have done before. Part of the response has to be to reinforce domestic institutions in light of rising illiberal narratives and the novel challenges presented by the distinctive advent of China as global rules shaper. This includes strengthening Canadian institutions linked to the exercise of democracy as well as individual rights and freedoms, and revitalizing best practices in areas such as, R&D, academic freedom, freedom of the press, and data and internet governance.
- d) **“Challenge and engage”**. There is a category of issues that go beyond the strict confines of the bilateral, Canada-China relationship: for instance, when Chinese behaviour arguably qualifies as “gross violations of internationally recognized human rights,” or falls in the category of forced technology transfers, involve companies around the world, or the respect of international agreements, such as the Vienna convention. Here, Canada can achieve more in collaboration with other partners, and at multilateral fora. The goal here however has to be to continue to engage China, not isolate it.

Problems arise when there is a mismatch between types of Chinese behaviour and levels of Canadian responses. Questions relating to China’s respect for international agreements cannot be dealt with entirely within the confines of the Canada-China bilateral commercial relationship.

Conclusion

For any of the above to be feasible, two developments are necessary: deepening channels of communication and increasing Asia and China literacy across the board.

From the Canadian government’s perspective, the tone of Canada’s China policy, which can be modulated across issue-areas and across time, should be divorced from the

structure of the China relationship (official channels of communication), which should remain in place and continue to deepen, despite changes in government. Working to restore and bolster official channels and support Track 1.5 and Track II channels including across academic, business, arts and people-to-people networks is key.

China and Asia experts are important, but literacy levels need to be raised more broadly. Mobility of human resources across the Pacific needs to increase. How to develop deeper Asia/China literacy? In the absence of additional resources, a *shift* in existing resources is necessary—in proportion to the shifts in the drivers of Canadian interests globally.¹⁵ There are long-term and short-term horizons to keep in mind. Over the long-term, there is a need to concentrate on education to foster the right sets of skills for the next generation. Over the short-term however, the creation of spaces for learning and sharing across silos, continuous skill building, increased mobility and constructive dialogues on Asia/China should be supported.

Deep changes in the balance of power are disturbing the foundations upon which Canada has built foreign policy narratives and engagement practices since the end of the second world war. Canada is well placed to seize the moment and develop a foreign policy well adapted to the 21st century, an era of polycentric global governance. Adjusting our approach to China by developing an adaptive, modular and strategic rationale for engagement will be one of the major challenges of Canadian foreign policy in the coming years.

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