

A Superpower Tug of War: Canada's Challenges and Opportunities in a post-COVID-19 World

Ashleigh Kong, Camelia Touzany, Jeremy Vander Hoek and Mengyun Zhang

Issue

China's rise to power poses challenges to the West's hegemonic position in the world order. Despite differences in many policy areas, Canada can seek further cooperation and engagement with China in the areas of climate change mitigation and global health to advance its values and interests without alienating itself from its traditional allies, the United States in particular.

Background

The current state of the United States-China relationship is characterized by growing tensions, uncertainty and rivalry, demonstrated through trade wars and the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic. Canada cannot afford to adopt an either-or position with regard to these states. The present reality requires the federal government to carefully consider and manage the relationship with Beijing. The challenge then is to determine the best practices to ease the tensions in the relationship while avoiding potential areas of alienation from the United States.

China's role in the rules-based international order can be framed in two ways. On one hand, the exponential growth it has undergone as a result of trade and private sector liberalization has led to significant legitimization. In other words, China has exhibited an increased willingness to not only acknowledge the existence of such rules, but also to ensure its practices exercise legitimate

bounds of authority within them. On the other, China's interpretation of this order is focused on the supremacy of sovereignty. This focus has led to a strict opposition to intervention, which includes but is not limited to human rights. Rather than opposing the international rules-based order, China aims to transform it (Lee 2019). For example, the country has released a memorandum of understanding supporting the Belt and Road Initiative and has generated some support for their illiberal treatment of Uighurs (ibid.; Cumming-Bruce 2019). These initiatives resist the pressure of intervention while simultaneously working to protect China's image as an ethical member of the rules-based international order. China's impact on the rules-based international order is not limited to a unipolar strategy. Instead, it demonstrates diversity that can be best highlighted through its global projects and policies (Hameiri and Jones 2018). Therefore, engagement rather than strict resistance will be fundamental in shaping Chinese foreign policy's influence on the rules-based international order (ibid., 593).

Canada-China Relations during COVID-19

Efforts by both China and Canada in the fight against COVID-19 reflect a potential resetting of the previously tense bilateral relationship. Yet despite recent efforts, the Canada-China relationship remains complicated, with increasing potential for deterioration.

First, the status quo remains for the Michaels-Meng dispute. China halted all visits from Canadian diplomats earlier in the year as part of its efforts to limit access to prisons during the pandemic (Fife, Chase and Vanderklippe 2020). Moreover, the most recent ruling on May 27, 2020, in favour of the Crown certainly disappoints China and points toward a lengthy seesaw game between the two countries on that issue. This disappointment is compounded by the condemnation Beijing has received from Canada and its allies over the proposed national security law to impose on Hong Kong (Chase and Fife 2020).

Second, China recognizes Canada's position within the World Health Organization (WHO) as separate from that of the United States, which accused the WHO of covering up the outbreak and on these grounds suspended funding to the organization. The United States also accused China of initially withholding information about the virus from the WHO. Canadian Foreign Affairs Minister François-Philippe Champagne and Prime Minister Justin Trudeau have made it clear that this politicization of the virus is not recommended, as it will only deter our joint efforts in fighting the global pandemic. However, China has also responded sternly against Canada's supporting position to give Taiwan observer status in a WHO meeting, seeing it as an infringement of Chinese sovereignty (Blanchfield 2020b).

Third, China and Canada are both committed to helping each other receive all the medical equipment and supplies needed during the pandemic. Canada demonstrated leadership by initiating the process of assistance and support for China, which was well received by their government. China is also actively resolving Canada's concerns over the quality control of one million face masks that were shipped to Canada, demonstrating integrity in our bilateral relationship. In matters of trade during the pandemic, China is actively streamlining the passage of Canadian goods through Shanghai's airports, and ensuring there are no restrictions on how long the ground crews of chartered cargo planes can wait on the ground (Blanchfield 2020a).

Finally, there is a growing hostility in public as well. On Canada's side, a recent poll by Angus Reid Institute (2020) suggests that only 14 percent of Canadians have a favourable impression of China, and 85 percent believe the Chinese government has not been honest about the pandemic. The poll also found that more than 80 percent

of Canadians wanted Huawei barred from Canada's 5G network, rising from around two-thirds before the pandemic (ibid.). On China's side, the ruling of Meng Wanzhou's case in favour of the Crown, while coming out of Canada's independent judicial system, may be read by the public negatively as Canada being an accomplice to the United States (Reuters 2020).

Canada-China Relations and Alternative Futures

Canada's strained relationship with China has deep implications for its broader diplomacy, especially with the United States. One possible future in a post COVID-19 world sees China in a weaker position within the world order. This may lead China to pursue greater adherence within the rules-based international order as it conforms to the WHO (Feldwisch-Drentrup 2020), the international human rights regime, and the World Trade Organization (WTO) (Singh 2019). However, another possibility is that China develops a stronger position, allowing the country to use its power to shun the world order and its rules. China's rise to power poses a challenge to America's hegemonic position in the world order and has placed middle powers such as Canada between a rock and a hard place, as they must decide between continuing to engage with Asia or to reassert traditional ties to allies such as the United States.

Areas of Difference

There are policy areas where Canada's and China's interests are clearly at odds. For example, positioning itself as a strong supporter of the United Nations human rights regime, Canada advocates individual freedom of religion, freedom of speech, the right to protest, and cares about individual welfare. By contrast, focusing on the importance of sovereignty in a collectivist culture, China underscores state control and refuses foreign interventions in its domestic affairs (Peerenboom 2005). Moreover, China places emphasis on different aspects of human rights, taking subsistence rights as fundamental and making poverty reduction the priority (Ibhawoh 2011). Internet governance is another area of disagreement. Canada is caught within the superpower competition between the United States and China on the application and promotion of 5G technologies. With the United States blocking Huawei and encouraging allies to follow suit, Canada is the only nation among the Five Eyes intelligence alliance that has yet to decide (Mank 2020).

Canadian policies that negatively affect Chinese interests could, in turn, result in an even more punitive backlash from China that could endanger Canadian citizens and Canadian national interests in areas such as trade. Both countries support multilateralism in a rules-based trading system underpinned by the WTO. However, while Canada strives to promote trade liberalization, China has circumvented these rules in order to achieve its national objectives without liberalizing its trade (Blustein 2019). Both nations are negotiating and implementing preferential trade agreements with others. Despite the initiation of a joint feasibility study on a China-Canada free trade agreement, trade talks would be halted if the United States accuses Canada of entering into negotiations with a “non-market economy,” and threats to quit the trilateral trade deal between Canada, the United States and Mexico may occur as an act of deterrence (Vomiero 2019).

Areas for Cooperation

There are two areas where China and Canada have an opportunity to cooperate based on shared policy goals: climate change and global health. The nations are allies in the fight against rising temperatures on a domestic and global scale. Relevant to this fight is the growing consensus on the need not just to reduce carbon emissions but also to invest in renewable infrastructure that can transform the global energy market (Azevedo et al. 2020). Notably, China has invested heavily in the development and manufacturing of renewable energy sources, including wind turbines, solar panels and batteries (Baker, Shultz and Halstead 2020). This investment demonstrates a keen commitment to emissions reduction and innovation. Canada ought to take advantage of this overlap in policy priority. COVID-19 and the broader global health regime provide another unique opportunity for Canada and China to collaborate. Ultimately, global health concerns not only health policy but geopolitical considerations as well. As Australia calls for an inquiry into China's handling of the 2020 COVID pandemic, anti-Chinese sentiment has grown in the face of an increasingly hostile Chinese leadership (Erlanger 2020; Pei 2020). Canada has an opportunity to renew its commitments to global health standards while helping ease the growing tension between China and the global community.

Recommendations

- 1. Canada should develop and innovate upon existing track two diplomacy partnerships with China in the areas of climate change and global health.** Canada and China recognize that in both issues, scientific innovation is a key to success. By partnering through university and other initiatives, Canada and China can expand their research and development aspirations together. This development not only leads to the achievement of policy goals, but also helps improve the relationship that has stagnated in the past few years. The form of this relationship can build upon the Canada-China Joint Committee on Environmental Cooperation, but must include more investment from the federal government.
- 2. Canada should develop a formal Canada-Sino Scientific Council responsible for consistent scientific collaboration between Canada and China.** A new council or committee dedicated to scientific initiatives must be created. Essential to the success of these programs is the establishment of concrete research-sharing projects as well as the centralization of academic or research-focused actors, not the states. As an independent and permanent association, this organization will consistently embed Canadian and Chinese technological and scientific achievement within each other's national interest. Key to the success of this program is a recognition that the global problems of tomorrow require our vision of self-interest to extend beyond national borders.
- 3. Canada should strengthen the bilateral Sino-Canadian relationship with the first prime ministerial state visit post-COVID-19 in Beijing.** As China continues to receive an international backlash over COVID-19, creating a geopolitical public relations crisis, Canada has an opportunity for diplomacy to demonstrate leadership and willingness to strengthen its relationship with China. Initiating the first state visit by the prime minister to Beijing would signal Canada's willingness to work with and not against China. This would be of special importance when China is facing international criticism about its initial approach to dealing with COVID-19 and growing anti-China sentiment globally. It would be a goodwill gesture that, when combined with the track two and scientific council proposals, would provide

an opportunity for Canada to reset the relationship and soften tensions, and advance climate change and global health goals without compromising its values with respect to democracy and human rights.

About the Authors

Ashleigh Kong is a student in Wilfrid Laurier University's Master of International Public Policy program, based at the BSIA.

Camelia Touzany is a student in Wilfrid Laurier University's Master of International Public Policy program, based at the BSIA.

Jeremy Vander Hoek is a student in the University of Waterloo's Master of Arts in Global Governance program, based at the BSIA.

Mengyun Zhang is a student in the joint-University of Waterloo/Wilfrid Laurier University Ph.D. in Global Governance program, based at the BSIA.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank Dr. Kimie Hara and Dr. Andrew Thompson for their guidance and mentorship. Additional thanks to the BSIA and GAC for their consistent support and feedback throughout this project.

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