

**Institute for Peace and Diplomacy**  
**Panel on Canada-China Relations: Challenges and Opportunities**  
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**Speaking Notes for Opening Remarks**  
**The Honourable Yuen Pau Woo, Senator for British Columbia**

It is an honour to be on a panel with distinguished experts who also happen to be old friends. We have had many discussions on Canada-China relations over the decades, and a fair share of disagreement, but I don't think we could have guessed that, on the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of diplomatic relations, the national discussion on bilateral relations would be as fraught as it is today.

Across the country, the mood on China is febrile, and the fever is nowhere higher than in Ottawa, especially Parliament Hill.

There is a desire all round for "rethinking Canada-China relations", which is my own wish and part of the title of an article that will soon be published in International Journal under my name. But whereas previous discussions on bilateral relations were premised on the general question of "How to improve Canada-China relations?", the question today – in some circles -- is "Should we even seek to improve Canada-China relations?".

There is a longstanding formula in diplomacy and foreign policy, especially when it comes to relations with major powers, which is to seek to "compartmentalize" problems in one area of a relationship so that other areas can continue to operate, if not flourish. Is compartmentalization still an option for the Canada-China relationship? I hope so, but there are pressures to break down the "fire barriers" in the relationship and, if you will, let the flames course through the larger edifice of bilateral ties.

What is behind the newfound desire to “rethink” China? What has fundamentally changed? Despite much of the popular commentary, I do not believe it is the nature of the regime as such, and not even the advent of Xi Jinping. There is no question that President Xi is a more authoritarian figure and that his approach to Chinese governance and international affairs is unattractive to western sensibilities (to put it mildly). But he is part of the same communist regime that has been in power for 70 years and which was arguably more brutal towards its own citizens in the 50s, 60s, and 70s than it is today. The essence of the Chinese regime – notably the primacy of the CCP and its Leninist ideology – is not much different now than it has been since 1949.

I believe what is driving the contemporary impulse to rethink China is not just ideological distaste of communism and repugnance over Chinese state actions, but it is that China today is more prominent and more influential in its surrounding region and around the world. This shift in China’s global weight has been most pronounced since the Global Financial Crisis of 2008. Since that landmark year, China has accounted for between 30-60 percent of annual global growth, with 2020 perhaps pushing the top end of that range because China is one of the few major economies to show positive GDP growth last year.

In other words, the newfound concern over China, deep down, is not so much ideological (as in the nature and actions of the CCP as such), but about concern over Chinese power. It is, to use a phrase no longer much favoured by Chinese leaders, about the “rise of China” (中国崛起).

The flip side of China’s rise is of course its implications for the United States’ position as the global hegemon since the end of the cold war. The attention paid to China during the Trump administration may have been erratic, but it was not anomalous in terms of the broader anxiety felt by American elites about how the US will fare in the context of a rising China. Early signals from the Biden administration suggest a change in tone on US policy towards China, but essentially no difference in the strong sense of rivalry that characterized the Trump approach. Given the highly-polarized nature of domestic politics in the United States, my sense is that the

Biden administration will be only too happy to find common ground with Republicans on a China policy that leans “tough”. The early signs certainly point in that direction.

My point is simply that US-China strategic rivalry should be at the center of discussions about Canada’s relations with China and more broadly, China’s place in the world. The contest between China and the US has all the hallmarks of great power competition, with its attendant risks for each side as well as for third parties, as the history of power transition will attest. To date, the geopolitics of US-China strategic competition is couched in euphemisms such as de-coupling, techno-nationalism, and de-globalization, with some commentators brushing aside the possibility of serious damage to the world economy.

Dreamers in Beijing and DC fantasize about the rapid demise of “decadent and ungovernable” American society or the sudden implosion of a “corrupt and illegitimate” Communist Party. The more likely reality, however, is that strategic competition between China and the United States will last decades, and that as the contest deepens, the interests of each side will increasingly take precedence over the views and preferences of third countries. The fact that we are looking at a decades-long contest underscores my belief that US-China rivalry is the single biggest factor shaping bilateral relations between Ottawa and Beijing, and that the challenge we face is to find the degrees of freedom that we are allowed in navigating rivalry between the two great powers.

A few other observations on the context for rethinking Canada-China relations:

Much of the “rethinking” of the bilateral relationship hitherto has focused on identifying problems in the relationship, but not enough on what might be called the underlying “problematique”. There is indeed a long list of problems that characterize current relations, but a list in and of itself does not define a diplomatic relationship. A list is simply a list. One could presumably make a list of good things that are happening between Canada and China, but that would also be simply a list and it wouldn’t go very far in terms of defining the bilateral

relationship, or helping chart a course for the future. A problematique is not a list of problems; it is rather a way of defining the overarching problem, or question, that you are seeking to address. In foreign policy terms, I believe it boils down to how we see China in relation to Canada – now and in the future. Another way of putting it is to ask the question “What is China to us”?

To be sure, some commentators have already made up their minds: Just over a year ago, the Globe and Mail editorial board proclaimed China a “threat” to Canada. If this is in fact the problematique for Canadian policy towards China, we have to seriously consider all of the implications that flow from branding a foreign country (and a superpower, no less) a threat.

I would like to offer a term that is less value-laden, in the form of China as a “Global Neighbour”. It may come as an affront to those who are repulsed by China that I would speak of the PRC as a neighbor – with all of its connotations of well, “neighbourliness”. But think a bit more deeply about your neighbourhood and it is likely that you will be able to identify neighbours who are not “neighbourly”. That troublesome neighbour may even be the one with the biggest residence on your block. What’s more, we don’t get to choose our neighbourhoods – at least not in the context of international policy. The idea of China as a global neighbour underscores the reality that Canada is in proximity with China on so many fronts and in so many places – not just in the geographic sense, but on all the issues that matter to Canada domestically and internationally. In some geographies and on some issues, our stance to our global neighbor should be to build a sturdy fence; in other areas, we should have an open border; yet other areas, something in between. But it is clear that we have our territory and China has its own, and there will be times and instances when the governance of our territory is markedly different from that of China.

Let me close my opening remarks with some comments about the context in which this discussion and many other discussions about China are taking place in this country. It is not a healthy one, and I have to say that the example set by discussions in and around parliament are

not helping. Repugnance over Chinese actions on a range of issues, from arbitrary detention of Canadian citizens to the curtailment of rights in HK, together with fear of Chinese power and anxiety about Chinese interference have created an environment where discussions about China have become very divisive, and prone to reflexive labeling and denunciations, rather than open-minded conversation.

This meeting is no exception, and I know all the panelists speaking after me will be choosing their words extremely carefully so as to not be cast as – to use the most charitable description – “panda huggers”. It is not an exaggeration to say that in Canada today anyone who wants to offer a view that is even slightly aligned with a position of the Chinese government runs the risk of being tainted as disloyal or, worse, a stooge of the CCP. I speak from experience and I have the luxury of a Senate appointment and the parliamentary privilege that comes with it. How much more difficult it must be for those who do not have the protections I enjoy.

This unhealthy context has been fostered by a larger trend towards “litmus tests” on China issues, which seek to box individuals into neat categories such as pro-China or anti-China. As a Chinese Canadian, I am particularly sensitive to litmus tests, which include questions such as “Are you associated with a United Front organization?” “Do you meet with Chinese government officials?” “Do you do business with a Chinese State-owned entity?” “Did you previously work for the Chinese government or military?” “Do you carry a Huawei device?” “Are you on WeChat?” and so on. If you don’t believe that there are litmus tests being applied on a regular basis, just take a look at the reporting on China and Chinese issues in our mainstream press, and the statements that are uttered in and around Parliament Hill.

Litmus tests are a very bad way of developing foreign policy and, for that matter, a very bad way of treating human beings. I hope this session will help us steer away from simplistic formulae in our rethinking of Canada-China relations and look forward to the presentations from my fellow panelists.