



Paul Evans

“Canada and the People’s Republic of China at 40:
What’s After Engagement?”

Luncheon speech to the National Conference on the 40th Anniversary of Canada-China Relations
Chateau Laurier Hotel, Ottawa

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It’s an honour to address you in such a grand room and on such a symbolic occasion. I’m grateful to Gordon Houlden for the invitation – something no doubt affected by my status as a U of A alumnus – and for his collaboration with the dynamic Nelly Ng in co-mingling the participants in two meetings for this lunch together.

Both meetings are looking at Canada-China relations in a way that is part commemoration, part celebration, and part “what’s next?” And they are part of a series of similar events in both countries over the next month, including in Beijing tomorrow, hosted by the Canadian International Council, the University of British Columbia, and the Canada-China Business Council.

Gordon has asked that we use this as an opportunity to “celebrate the past but ask tough questions about the future.” Based on a book I’m completing titled “Canada and Global China: After Engagement,” I’m going to take up his challenge with a special focus on the Canadian side of the relationship.

Looking backwards, this is a fitting moment to celebrate the accomplishments and people associated with 40 years of successful and occasionally spectacular diplomacy. We’ve been hearing the names of Norman Bethune, Alvin Hamilton, Arthur Menzies, Huang Hua and most frequently of all Pierre Trudeau and Zhou Enlai. And we’ve heard many references to unnamed diplomats, academics, students, business people, NGO leaders, entertainers and two-way migrants who are been the fabric of a thriving relationship. A toast to them all!

And there’s been a little nostalgia in “remembering when.” Remember when DEA/DFAIT managed the relationship and had the resources to do it? Remember when Chinese students who

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graduated from Canadian institution almost all planned to stay in Canada? And remember when we spoke of bike-jams in Beijing rather than bike-lanes in Vancouver?

Turning to the current moment in relations, it's clear that we are in transition. Yesterday Prime Minister Harper stated that the "strategic partnership between the two countries has never been more promising." This inferred that the earlier Conservative approach of "cool politics, warm economics" had ended and a new chapter of ministerial visits, commercial and regulatory deals had arrived.

The strategic partnership of 2005 may be back. But in broad perspective, what does it mean?

That leads me back to the script of my own book with the provocative title of "Canada and Global China: After Engagement." Global China is not difficult for anyone in this room to understand. The provocative bit is "After Engagement." Even neo-conservative ideologues have acknowledged that containment and isolation are no longer feasible alternatives. Rather, the debate is about what kind of engagement and what adjective to define it—"deep," "comprehensive, "layered" or what Kevn Rudd has called "genuine".

What is the right form of "engagement" for Canada? Of course, as we've discussed at this meeting, Canada was an engager before engagement was cool. Between 1970 and 2005 what could easily be called a constructive engagement strategy was carried out on a bipartisan basis under successive Liberal and Progressive Conservative governments.

My key argument is that whatever the success of that 35 year consensus on engaging China, it is going to have to be altered to be sustainable. And this is not, repeat not, because the cooler Conservative approach since 2005 has solved the problem. To the contrary, "cool politics, warm economics" between 2005 and 2008 bordered on the disastrous and the partial re-embrace of the old consensus on engagement is poorly articulated and lacking in strategic vision.

Historically, the rationale for engagement has been built on three pillars: economic interests; geo-political aspirations; and a moral sense of mission. Engagement was never just shrewd economic and clever politics, it was also a compelling moral enterprise.

The logic that Pierre Trudeau presented when negotiating diplomatic relations stood for twenty years. Pursue economic possibilities but also aim to lessen China's isolation and thereby help end the Cold War by separating Beijing from Moscow. The hidden premise was the belief that whatever the difficulties and uncertainties, opening China would be a necessary part of laying the foundations for its later transformation. We could encourage change in China but not expect it in the immediate future.

Jean Chretien also pursued Canadian commercial interests in China but presented a stronger moral case: with market forces in China will come political liberalization.

Paul Martin favoured a "strategic partnership" that would advance Canada's interests not just through trade but through a Pacific Gateway strategy. It also included inventing new

international institutions to make China an integral part and what some would call a “responsible stakeholder” in an L20/G20 world order.

The challenge for our leadership—Liberal or Conservative—is that we are now dealing with a powerful China that is a leading edge of a global power shift. The ground is shifting beneath us. China is no longer over there—it is a driver of daily life in Canada.

Ideas of facilitating China’s membership in international institutions, much less concentrating primarily on expanding bilateral trade, are now outdated. China is not just a trading partner or a market, it is a game changer. It is difficult to think of a major global issue, and even many regional ones, where the path to a solution does not run through Beijing as well as Washington.

It seems to me unlikely that we are on the edge of a Beijing Consensus replacing a Washington Consensus or the dawn of China ruling the world. Rather, China has become a global power and this has enormous implications for the world economy, the geo-political balance, and international institutions. It will be building clubs and making rules, not just joining them and following them.

If this was not clear in 2005, it is the new wisdom in the aftermath of the economic crisis and the emergence of a G-2 like world.

In this new and messy multi-centric world order, does engagement as earlier conceived still make sense? Do you “engage” an emerging (if fragile) superpower with the intention of changing it, adjusting to it, or some combination of the two? Is it still a good bet that sooner or later China will conform with the principles of “freedom, democracy, human rights and the rule of law” framed by our Conservative government. Are the values and the international institutions we helped construct after the Second World War based on genuine “universals” or are they simply ours?

The shift can be detected in Canadian public attitudes. China remains deeply embedded in the Canadian imagination and continues to evoke strong emotions, feelings and reactions. Surveys conducted by the Asia Pacific Foundation of Canada reveal that Canadians feel something big is happening in Asia and with China in particular. Improbable as it sounds, more than two-thirds believe that within a decade China will be more powerful than the United States. And most see important economic opportunities.

At the same time, Canadians are increasingly anxious about a rising China in several domains including as an economic competitor, producer of unsafe products, violator of human rights and democracy, fast military modernizer, spoiler of the environment, and meddler in domestic Canadian affairs.

Let there be no mistake, the Conservatives hard line on China reflects (and amplifies) some of this anxiety. Simply mention the words “state owned enterprises” or Tibet, Dalai Lama and Liu Xiaobo, or made in China toys and watch the reaction.

In the meeting room immediately adjacent to this one there is an international conference now underway larger than ours focused on security and intelligence issues. Based on the recent comments by the Director of our Canadian Service and Intelligence Service, it's unlikely the participants are as sanguine about China's rise as most of us are in this room.

So if engagement is now to be pursued on a very different international playing field, one in which it is far from certain that the world order we prefer and have helped build will be the gold standard for the future, and in which an inevitable march to a Western-centred world order is no longer so inevitable, what do we need to do?

Let me offer three prescriptions.

First, we need a change of attitude. The enduring effort to change China must be based be replaced by working with China and living with China. This is a matter of shifting from the standard of universal values to shared values and mutual value. In application this means shifting from expecting and promoting democracy to encouraging good governance. It means shifting our discourse from human rights to social justice. It does not mean agreeing with China on all issues or agendas or abandoning our values. But it means putting them into the context of a new balance of power and its civilizational rise.

Second, we need to know China better and we need to know it differently. A new strategy of engagement means serious study. Our academic apparatus has expanded substantially in the past twenty-five years but rarely has an impact on public understanding or public policy. And almost none of our universities have the deep partnerships with Chinese counterparts that extend beyond occasional meetings, intermittent exchanges and student recruitment. We are falling behind countries like Australia and Singapore in creating and disseminating a knowledge base for working with global China.

Third, we need engaged national leadership to focus our efforts; to reshape the Canada-China narrative; to explain China. This goes far further than a stream of ministerial visits and a focus on increased transactions.

We can expect only limited leadership and small steps from our Conservative government at this point. This is partly because it is a minority government, partly because of its ideological antipathy to China, and partly because of its philosophy of small government and a role limited to facilitating transactions.

The current dynamism resides with provincial governments, business, and civil society organizations including our universities and colleges intent on ramping upon their involvement with China. At some future point these might coalesce into a national strategy. The intention of the Asia Pacific Foundation of Canada to launch a national conversation on Asia is a sign of the time.

In conclusion, engagement is needed but needs to be conceived in a new way. It will focus less on changing China and more on knowing China; less on imposing an external agenda than finding mutual value in an era of unprecedented equality.

Can we get our minds around the huge forces in play? Can we convince Canadians that China is not just important and complicated but a key to their future prosperity and global progress? Can we recapture the initiative and the attention of Chinese leaders? Can we find a way to rekindle a sophisticated conversation with them? Can we do this on the basis of equality and mutual respect across vast differences in political systems and civilizations?

The answers largely depend on the imagination and ingenuity of the people in this room, our counterparts in China, and a political leadership in Canada that needs to be prodded and prodded again.

Thank you and I'd be happy to respond to questions and comments.