



Introduction :  
The Meng Factor in Canadian Views on China

Paul Evans and Li Xiaojun, University of British Columbia

Revised: 13 March 2019

As the judicial extradition hearing for Huawei executive Meng Wanzhou proceeds in Vancouver, Canada-China relations remain at their most turbulent point since Tiananmen Square in June 1989.

It is widely recognized that this is much more than an isolated bilateral diplomatic dispute. It pulls Ottawa into the vortex of a deepening geo-political and technological tug-of-war between the US and China.

A tidal wave of opinion expressed in traditional and social media in both countries over the past three months indicates the level of interest and high emotions in play.

The bigger picture is how far reactions to the current crisis will shape longer-term views about the nature of the Canada-China relationship, its potential and its limitations.

Recent Canadian polls by Nanos, Angus Reid and Research Co. have concentrated on opinions about the Meng arrest, the detention of two Canadians, the actions of the Trudeau government, and views on Huawei and Chinese investment in sensitive sectors including finance and telecommunications.

The deeper question is whether the emotions and calculations unleashed are affecting fundamental attitudes about China and Canadian China policy. Have we reached a tipping point in public views such that the engagement strategy that has guided policy in Ottawa for most of the past fifty years is no longer tenable?

A new national poll conducted by Qualtrics on behalf of our research team at the University of British Columbia looked for shifts in basic attitudes. In the field February 4<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup>, and with a sample of 1,161 adults across the country, we posed seven questions, worded in the same way as in the longer baseline surveys conducted in September 2017 and April 2018 well before the current crisis began. We then looked for the differences in the responses.

Considering that the Meng case is far from resolved and the situation volatile, the results are partial but suggestive in four areas

First, the level of negativity about China is significant. Only 22% have a favourable image of China, down 14 points. There is new skepticism about China being the world's largest economic power in a decade (down from 64% to 51%).

The surprise is that favourable views of the United States have dropped even faster, 52% to 36%. Of seven countries listed, China and the US are the most unpopular behind only Russia.

Second, the results reinforce those of the Angus Reid poll in January that 35% of Canadians feel that Canada-China relations are in for long-term trouble while 65% feel that the current disputes will be sorted out and relations will revert to normal. Our poll indicates that despite a range of anxieties including about Chinese investment in our technology sector, support for a Free Trade Agreement with China stands at 64%, only five points down from 2017.

Third, in identifying the top priority for the Canadian government in relations with China, promoting human rights has increased slightly to 17%. But it still ranks fourth after expanding trade and investment (32%), furthering cooperation on global issues (19%), and protecting Canadian values and institutions at home (19%).

These results contrast with a recent Angus Reid Poll that found a majority of Canadians view human rights as more important than trade. Our poll suggests the picture is different when respondents are given more options than just trade and human rights.

Combined with protecting intellectual property (4%), and cyber security (9%), the protection of Canadians at home equals the importance of trade and investment. The China on our doorsteps is top of mind.

Fourth, the level of satisfaction with the Canadian government's efforts to protect Canadian citizens under arrest or in imprisoned in China remains low. While the number answering positively is up 6 points to 18%, the number responding negatively is up 11 points to 42%, with undecideds shrinking 16 points to 40%.

Overall, Canadian opinions of China and the Chinese government are increasingly negative but expectations of the relationship have shifted only slightly. What appears to be changing is the sense that Canada is more alone in the world than it was in 2017, more anxious about interactions with China in high-tech sectors, and more worried about threats to domestic values and institutions at home and to Canadians abroad.

Beyond the immediate decisions Ottawa must make in this election year about the Meng extradition and Huawei's investment in our 5G system is the refashioning of the engagement narrative. Engagement based on the proposition that it will produce political liberalisation or the adoption of Western-style capitalism is no longer credible. And there is a new awareness of China's power and its willingness to use that power assertively when it feels necessary.

It will be no easy matter to frame a post-engagement strategy that emphasises living with China rather than befriending or changing it especially when emotions are so raw. That strategy will have to focus on cooperation whenever possible, pushing back when necessary, and addressing

growing anxieties about China's presence, influence and interference in Canada's domestic affairs.

**For Further Information**

Paul Evans - [paul.evans@ubc.ca](mailto:paul.evans@ubc.ca)

Xiaojun Li - [xiaojun.li@ubc.ca](mailto:xiaojun.li@ubc.ca)