



THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA
School of Public Policy and Global Affairs

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**October 2019 National Survey Results and Findings on Canadian Public Attitudes on
China and Canada-China Relations**

I. Introduction

These are the results from the most recent UBC poll on Canadian views of China and Canada-China relations. It is the fourth in a series conducted over the past two years intended to survey Canadian views on a wide range of issues, probe the sources and dimensions of the broader attitudes beneath them, and present them in a way accessible to Canadian decision makers and the general public.

The first national survey was conducted in English and released on 17 October 2017. The second, released 7 May 2018, was conducted in French only and concentrated on residents of Quebec. The third survey, conducted in English and French on a national sample was released 13 March 2019. Results and findings from all three are available at <https://sppga.ubc.ca/research-impact/publications/>.

The UBC series is distinctive in the number of questions posed (roughly 70 in the first and fourth surveys), the focus specifically on China rather than Asia or foreign affairs more generally. It also repeats a large number of identical questions. The longitudinal data generated is essential to testing the reliability of the questions and identifying trends.

The surveys have been designed and administered by a five-person team headed by Professors Paul Evans and Xiaojun Li at the University of British Columbia, Professor Pascale Massot at the University of Ottawa, and researchers Brady Fox and Stefano Burzo. The questions posed are largely original but eight directly replicate questions posed in surveys conducted by other organizations including the Pew Research Center, the Lowy Institute in Australia, the Asia Pacific Foundation of Canada, and Angus Reid.

II. Capsule Analysis

Amidst the diplomatic crisis that has followed the arrests of Meng Wanzhou and the two Canadians Michael Kovrig and Michael Spavor in December 2018, media commentary on China has been overwhelmingly angry and critical. Developments in Xinjiang and Hong Kong plus increased attention to Chinese influence and interference activities in Canada and elsewhere have reinforced this negativity and led to calls for a more adversarial approach to China parallel to Washington's strategic competition with Beijing.

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What has been the effect on public attitudes of this tumult? Based on the results of a third national survey conducted by a team at UBC just before the election and using a battery of questions similar to ones used in October 2017 and February 2019, the short answer is that the public mood is increasingly wary and cool. At the same time it is pragmatic and nuanced about keeping doors open. Distrust of China has not translated into increased trust of the United States.

The chill is real. China is now viewed favourably by 29% of Canadians, down from 36% two years ago but up from 22% in February. In seven dimensions of international leadership, China is now seen ahead of the US in only one, the expectation that it will be the largest economy within a decade. Two years ago, it was perceived to be ahead in four.

Worries about China's domestic impact in Canada are increasing, especially about cyber-attacks and espionage, as well as China's expanding military capabilities.

Anxiety is palpable about the US and its relations with China. Only about half have a favourable view of the United States and 63% see the US as a friend of Canada compared to 43% who feel the same about China.

Distrust of China is not translating into more trust for the United States. A significant majority believe Canada can no longer trust the US to do the right thing in the world, and confidence in Donald Trump is below that of Xi Jinping. By a margin of more than two to one, Canadians disagree with the proposition that Canada should support US policy even if it means worsening relations with China. Fully 2/3rds foresee a Sino-US trade war having major consequences for Canada.

The desire for continued economic exchange with China remains strong. In six of seven areas Canadians see expanded economic interaction with China as contributing to economic prosperity. A remarkable 62% still support negotiation of a bilateral Free Trade Agreement.

In identifying the priorities for the Canadian government, rankings remain consistent with past results. The top priority is expanding economic ties followed in turn by working with China in addressing global issues, protecting Canadian values and institutions at home, and advancing human rights in China. The preferred method for advancing human rights remains deeper trade.

On the key questions about engagement, belief that human rights in China will improve as its economy opens remains strong but is down 11 points in two years. Slightly less than half believe relations with China will settle down and return to normal. More respondents believe China is not an adversary than those who feel it is.

On the immediate policy choices facing Ottawa, a slight plurality support the propositions that it was a mistake to arrest Ms Meng in the first place and that she should be released before court proceedings conclude.

An increasing plurality feel that Ottawa is not doing enough to protect Canadians under arrest in China, almost triple the number six months ago. Three quarters agree that Canada has been trapped in the middle of a US-China dispute.

And on Huawei, fully half do not want it playing a major role in our 5G system even as 43% support its continuing investment in research and development in Canada.

Overall, this suggests a significant foundation of public support for living and cooperating with China rather than what is frequently described as decoupling from it. As trust in both China and the US decline, and even amidst strong anxieties and misgivings, Ottawa still has room to maneuver should it wish in pursuing a balanced, independent and nuanced approach to its China agenda.

III. Key Results at a Glance

Note: In this section we have collapsed categories for ease of comparison. For example “strongly” or “somewhat” favourable is compressed into “favourable”. The more variegated responses can be found in the section on Full Responses.

In instances where three sets of responses are given to a question, these refer to the October 2017, March 2019 and the current October 2019 national surveys. They do not include the Quebec French language survey of March 2018.

Favourability

Percent having a favourable (very or somewhat) opinion of China, the United States, Australia and Russia:

- October 2017: China 36%; US 52%; Australia 90%; Russia 22%
- February 2019: China 22%; US 36%; Australia (missing); Russia 19%
- October 2019: China 29%; US 51%; Australia 84%; Russia 25%

Factors affecting overall view of China

- Extremely or somewhat positive: Chinese people you have met 57%; Chinese culture and history 51%; Chinese economic growth 39%; Chinese investment in Canada 35%;
- Extremely negative or somewhat negative: Chinese human rights record 59%; Chinese system of government 53%; military activities 50%; environment policies 47%

Importance to Canada

Importance to Canada’s future (on a scale of 1 to 10):

- October 2017: China 7.0; US 8.4; UK 6.6; India 5.3
- February 2019: China 5.8; US 6.8; UK 6.0; India 4.6
- October 2019: China 6.3; US 7.6; UK 6.4; India 5.0

US-China Comparisons

Largest economic power in 10 years: China 64, 52, 47; US 21, 26, 33

International leadership (Note a very high % of DKs, median 36)

- More responsible global leader: China 28, 22, 21; US 36, 36, 43
- Doing more to maintain peace: China 38, 26, 23; US 27, 31, 39
- More stable and predictable: China 41, 30, 28; US 32, 36, 42
- More respectful of other countries: China 31, 26, 24; US 33, 34, 38
- More committed to freedom of speech and expression: China 8, 10, 9; US 69, 61, 65
- Doing more for the poorer elements of their country: China 26, 23, 22; US 37, 38, 40
- Doing more to address environmental problems: China 36, 26, 22; US 30, 31, 41

Confidence in leaders to do the right thing regarding world affairs (Don't knows excluded)

- A lot or some confidence: Xi Jinping 27%; Donald Trump 22%; Justin Trudeau 51%
- Not too much or no confidence: Xi 72%, Trump 79%; Trudeau 49%

The US-China-Canada Triangle

Possibility of having good relations with China and the US at the same time: agree/somewhat agree 68%; somewhat or strongly disagree, 18%

Canada can no longer trust the US to do the right thing in the world: agree 61%; disagree 28%

China is a friend of Canada: agree 43%; disagree 39%

The US is a friend of Canada: agree 63%; disagree 27%

China has become Canada's adversary: agree 36%; disagree 43%

Canada should support US policy even if it means worsening relations with China: agree 26%; disagree 57%

Canada and China

Top priority for the Canadian government: consistent rank ordering in all three surveys: (1) promoting trade and investment; (2) building cooperation on global issues; (3) protecting Canadian values and institutions from an increasing Chinese presence; (4) promoting human rights in China; (5) protecting cyber security; and protecting intellectual property rights

Top concerns about a growing Chinese presence in Canada (very concerned or somewhat concerned):

- Housing affordability: 63, 54, 54
- Threats to jobs: 40, 43, 41
- Cyber-attacks and espionage: 45, 55, 55
- Challenges to Canadian values and institutions: 39, 42, 43

Ottawa doing enough to protect Canadian citizens under arrest or detention in China: Yes, 12, 18, 16; No, 31, 43, 43 (high undecided rate)

Regarding Meng Wanzhou

- Made a mistake in arresting her: 39% agree, 32% disagree
- Canada is caught in the middle between US and China: agree 74%; disagree 10%
- Rightly treated as a rule of law issue: agree 59% agree, disagree 18%
- Should release her before court proceedings conclude: agree 35 %; disagree 32%
- A deeper US-China trade war will have major consequence for Canada: agree 67%; disagree
- Canada's relations with China will settle down and return to normal: agree 43%; disagree 26%

Regarding Huawei/5G

- Mistake to allow HW to be major players in our 5G system: agree 50%; disagree 27%
- Considering strong opposition in US, Canada has no choice except to ban: agree 36% disagree 41%
- Encourage continuing HW investment in R&D in Canada: agree 43%; disagree 33%

Security and Defence

Serious concern about China's increasing military and defense capabilities over the next ten years: Yes 50%; No 14%

Preferred Canadian response in the event of a US-China military conflict: stay neutral 37%; depends on circumstances 18%; support the US militarily 10%; support the US but not militarily 10%.

Support for increased defence spending to deal with Chinese threats: October 2017, No 40%, Yes 16%; October 2019, No 28%, Yes 22%

Canada-China Economic Agenda

Support for negotiating a bilateral Canada-China Free Trade Agreement: support 69, 65, 62; oppose 19, 18, 20

Expanded trade with China:

- Likely to encourage investment in Canadians businesses: agree 62%; disagree 18%
- Give Canada a competitive edge, agree 55%; disagree 22%
- Necessary due to rising protectionism elsewhere: agree 52%, disagree 21%
- Bad because of China's political system, values: agree 35%; disagree 45%
- Would cause problems with the US: agree 45%; disagree 32%
- Would bring economic prosperity: agree 49% disagree 26%

Human Rights

Human rights in China will improve as its economy opens: October 2017 agree 59% disagree 28%; October 2019 agree 48%, disagree 29%

Political rights have not improved in the last decade: agree 36%; disagree 38%

Personal freedoms of Chinese citizens have improved in the past decade: agree 29% disagree 44%

Chinese leaders should be pressured to respect international treaties and conventions they have signed: agree 43%; disagree 43%

How best to promote human rights in China (in rank order and consistent in all three surveys: (1) strengthen the rule of law through trade agreements; (2) strengthen human rights and democratic reforms in China; (3) raising concerns privately; (4) people to people exchanges; (5) public statements and pressure; (6) economic sanctions

Information Sources

Frequency of learning news about China: 23% every day or at least 3-4 times a week; 32% 1-2 times a week; 38% almost never

Sources of news about China used sometimes or frequently: TV 53%; radio 32% print newspapers 31%; on-line papers and blogs 40%; social media 35%; discussion with other people 43%

Social media platforms used: Twitter 14%; Facebook, 43%; YouTube 23%; Reddit 6%; LinkedIn 5%

Language used: English 81%; French 15%; Chinese 2%

Source country for most news on China: Canada 62%; US 14%; Asia 5%; Europe 3% ; DK 17%

IV. Commentary and Insights

These are fine grain comments from members of the research team that go beyond the general summary. Readers are welcome to send comments to supplement the discussion of results and findings.

1. From Pascale Massot

Re favourability: Favourable views of China went down in Feb 2019 (22%), from 36% in 2017, only to perk back up in October 2019 (29%). Interestingly, the same is true of the opinion of the US (from 52% somewhat + very favourable in Oct 2017, to 36% in February 2019, back to 51% in October 2019)

Re support for an FTA: Quite stable now at 62%. Interestingly, the slight decrease in “moderately support” from 2017 has gone into “don't know”, instead of “oppose”. Very few strongly oppose (8%).

Re international leadership: China down in almost all categories. Notable is the fact that US numbers are not up, it is mostly the “don't knows” that are up. A decrease in confidence in Chinese leadership has not translated into an increase in confidence in US leadership.

Re potential US-China military conflict: Support for “Canada should stay neutral” is much higher in October 2019 (37.39%) than in 2017 (25.81%). There is also a decrease in “oppose conflict”, and a decrease in “depends on circumstances”. In contrast, “increase defense spending to deal with Chinese threats” has seen an increase in “maybe” and “yes” (58%), compared to a “no” majority in 2017. So respondents think Canada should stay neutral when it comes to China-US conflict, but a majority think Canada should (or maybe should) increase its own defense spending.

Re US-China-Canada triangle: Pretty pragmatic. A majority thinks we can have good relations with both (68%), a minority thinks that we should support the US at a cost of our relationship with China (26%).

Importance of foreign countries to Canada's future: Importance of various countries to Canada's future: February 2019 responses were lower across the board including US and China. What was happening? Respondents felt more isolated, or more defensive? Numbers have recovered in the October 2019 poll, but not back to 2017 levels. Isolationism on the rise? Increased disillusionment with both Chinese and American leadership?

Promoting human rights: Pretty pragmatic with private discussion at 20.09%, and provisions and practices integrated into agreements, at 26.01%. Far more popular than public statements, at 8.85%. Respondents also continue to put a priority on reform of institutions at home, at 21.96%.

Inference about the general pattern: The detailed questions gives us a deeper look into respondents' reasoning than the numerous shorter surveys that dominate media coverage. For instance, respondents think that expanded trade with China is still important despite China's slowing economy, they think it is likely to lead to expanded investment in Canada, but they are also wary of the type (and quality) of Chinese products entering the Canadian market, etc. Put together, these are quite nuanced positions.

Re Huawei: 50% of respondents think that it is best to exclude Huawei, but even less think Canada should do it under pressure from the US (36%). Further, there is quite a bit of support for Huawei investment in R&D (43% support, 33% oppose). This suggests that a variety of opinions on the broader Huawei question are present.

Results by language

16% of respondents (236 out of 1503) took the survey in French and about 15% of respondents (227 out of 1503) say they read their China news in French. About 21% of respondents (320 out of 1503) were Quebec residents at the time of the survey.

Re respondents who took the survey in French:

- more favourable and less unfavourable opinion on China on average than those who took the survey in English (En respondents). 34.32% of Fr respondents have a very or somewhat favourable opinion on China compared to 28.5% of En respondents. Similarly, 50% of Fr respondents have a very or somewhat unfavourable opinion on China compared to 59.59% of En respondents.
- more confidence that China will be a more responsible leader (26.27% compared to En 19.81%), do more to maintain peace (29.66% compared to 21.23%) and lead on the environment (25.85% compared to 20.92%), compared to En respondents. Similarly, Fr respondents tend to have less confidence that the US will be a more responsible leader (36.02% compared to 43.80%), will do more to maintain peace (30.08% compared to 41.04%) or do more to protect the environment (30.51% compared to 42.70%).
- less confidence in both Xi and Trump than En respondents. 19.92% of Fr respondents have a lot or some confidence in Xi, compared to 29.28% of En respondents. 15.26% of Fr respondents have a lot or some confidence in Trump compared to 23.84% of En respondents.
- attach more importance as the government's top priority to cooperation on global issues, and (to a lesser degree) intellectual property, and less importance to Protecting Canadian values and Trade, compared to En respondents.
- on support for an FTA with China, En and Fr respondents have almost identical preferences, with Fr respondents less likely to strongly oppose vs moderately oppose by 4%. The proportion of respondents that strongly or moderately strongly support an FTA with China are almost identical across languages (En at 62.2% and Fr at 61.86%).
- less likely to be very concerned about threat to jobs, housing affordability, challenges to values, and cyber, but less likely to be Not concerned as well.

Results by news source:

- Respondents consuming US and EU sources of news on China are more likely to have very unfavourable opinion on China (27.94% and 28.21%), compared to respondents consuming Canadian or Asian sources of news on China (21.68% and 21.43%).
- Respondents consuming Asian sources of news on China are more likely to have a very favourable opinion (12.86%) compared to the average (5.19%).
- Respondents consuming US news on China are more likely to think the US is going to be the largest economic power over the next decade (45.59%) than those who read Canadian news on China (32.58%).
- Respondents consuming US news on China are more likely to think the US is going to be more respectful of other people around the world, compared to China than those who read Canadian news on China (US News: US more respectful 50%, China more respectful 21.57%. Canadian News: US more respectful 38.19%, China more respectful 24.81%).

Overall, ‘Canadian source of news on China’ correlates with less negative sentiment on China and more negative sentiment on the US than ‘US source of news on China’.

Results by age group:

- China favourability tends to decrease with age. Younger demographics are more likely to have favourable views of China: 19-33 years old (favourable: 33.25%; unfavourable: 48.17%) 64-91 years old (favourable 24.86%; unfavourable: 68.51%). Yet, younger demographics (19-33 years old) are also less likely to think the Canadian priority towards China should be trade and investment (19.90%) compared to older demographics (64-91 years old: 33.98%).

2. From Stefano Burzo

Re Meng case: Exposure to the news seems associated with respondents’ assessment of the Meng case. Those who watch the news more often (every day or 3-4 times a week) are more much more likely to think that arresting Ms. Meng was a mistake *and* are at the same time more likely to think she should be released prior to the conclusion of judicial proceedings.

Re Huawei and 5G: The support for Huawei’s investment in Canadian R&D is surprising for two reasons. First, 50% of respondents believe it would be a mistake to allow Huawei or a Chinese company to be a major provider for the Canadian 5G system and 35% of respondents think that Canada should ban Huawei like the US. Second, Canadians are increasingly worried about cyber issues. In October 2019 respondents are almost twice as likely as they were in 2017 to identify cyber security as a top priority for the Canadian government and increasingly worried about cyber-attacks and espionage that is part of China’s growing presence in Canada.

Re the higher number of Don’t Knows: Respondents are more likely to say that they “don’t know” in 2019 that they were in 2017. This is true across almost all issues, whether it is trade, human rights, or international leadership. What seems to be true also across issue-areas is that women are much more likely than men to respond Don’t Know, often twice as likely or more. The youngest quartile of respondents (aged 19-33) are also more likely to respond “Don’t Know” than the eldest fourth of respondents (64-91).

Re underlying narrative: my interpretation is that respondents see, or wish to see, Canada as a greater player on the international stage:

- all countries (but France and Japan) are perceived as less important to Canada's future than they were in 2017.
- cybersecurity is now perceived as a top priority by almost twice as many respondents
- large and persisting support for the Canada-China FTA.
- greater support for neutrality in a hypothetical US-China conflict.
- greater support for increased defense spending.

All these dots seem to signal that the respondents see or seek an increased autonomy for Canada on the international stage. This is also consistent with a potential decrease in reliance on the United States.

3. From Brady Fox

Re the Meng case: Canadians were deeply frustrated by Canada's inability to maneuver a solution. One of the single clearest answers across our survey questions was that 74% of respondents felt Canada was caught in a conflict between China in the US. A plurality (39%) of respondents felt arresting Meng was a mistake, and a plurality (35%) feel she should be released before judicial proceedings complete. Only 26% of respondents felt Canada should follow US policy even if it means worsening relations with China, while 57% disagreed with the notion. At the same time 59% feel Canada has rightly treated the case as an issue of rule of law.

Re Cybersecurity and 5G: Emerging as a real issue in the public mind. While only 4% of respondents listed it as a priority in 2017, approximately 9% did so in the two surveys in 2019. 55% of respondents listed cyber-attacks and espionage as specific concerns in China's growing presence in Canada, overtaking housing affordability (54%) for the first time. 50% of respondents feel it would be a mistake to allow Huawei to be a major provider to Canada's 5G system.

At the same time, a plurality (43%) of respondents feel Huawei's R&D investment in Canada (including at universities) should be encouraged. This suggests there may be an appetite for addressing the issue as a series of decisions rather than a single ban/welcome one.

Re autonomy and isolationism: With attitudes about the importance of other countries to Canada declining and with strong support for focusing on domestic issues (67%), accepting fewer immigrants (50%), and feeling that Canada is too open to foreign influence (55%), Canadians are looking more inward. Faith in allies is low, with 62% responding that Canada can no longer rely on the US to do the right thing. What is less clear are the preferred policy options.

These results suggest growing confusion rather than a turn to autonomy in the face of major shifts in the international system.