

# Commentary



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## Facing Reality: Why the US-China rivalry is no excuse for the challenges posed by China

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### Introduction

In recent months, respected voices have sought to frame the challenges several countries are facing vis-à-vis the People's Republic of China (PRC) within the grander context of the US-China strategic rivalry. This phenomenon is not limited to one specific country or region; it exists in Canada (McIntyre 2020) and around the globe, including but not limited to Australia (Kelly 2019), Japan (Fukushima 2019), India (Shi 2020), Germany (Kharpal 2020), and more widely in Europe (Esteban et al. 2020).<sup>1</sup> Leaving aside for the moment what a “US-China strategic rivalry” fully entails, one does arguably exist, and highlighting the effect this rivalry has on various states is a valid exercise. However, in foreign policy discourse, this rivalry appears to have become the chosen mantra through which to swat away significant and complicated challenges with China.

Framing bilateral irritants solely within the context of this rivalry has unfortunately created an “out” by which to ignore the real problems many countries face in their dealings with China. When bilateral issues (e.g., trade- or

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foreign policy-related decisions) do arise between certain states and China, it is almost guaranteed that certain commentators rush toward the following conclusion: Specific and complicated issues either arise solely because of or are exacerbated primarily by China's rivalry with the US, thereby making affected states *de facto* "battlegrounds" for great power politics.

This "excuse" has led some commentators to dismiss concerns about China's aggressive international behaviour, bilateral irritants arising from incongruences in norms, challenges presented by the country's espionage and foreign interference activities, security risks posed by certain PRC entities (e.g., technology companies) beholden to invasive Chinese national security legislation, concerns about the use of private data and "digital authoritarianism," the use of hostage diplomacy, as well as the meting out of economic punishment for not conforming to Chinese interests. In short: some analysts would like to believe that China does not pose unique challenges to middle powers, and that such challenges would not exist in the absence of US-China competition.

“*The PRC's leadership itself had a clear choice on how to respond to Meng's arrest.*”

For example, the Australian government's announcement to restrict Huawei Technologies Co. Ltd.'s involvement in the country's 5G network infrastructure was met with strong condemnation by some. Rather than focus on the strategic issues at hand (i.e., the potential risks posed by a company beholden to PRC national security law to Australia's national critical infrastructure; see Kharpal 2019, Canada 2018), the discussion morphed into one about US-China rivalry (Westbrook and Kaye 2018), political motivations (Wolfe 2018), or more recently a "tech storm" (Carter 2020) between the US and China. These discussions, of course, largely ignore the fact that most Western companies face significant barriers in doing business in the PRC.

Canada's sovereign decision to uphold its obligations as per the Canada-US extradition treaty and arrest Huawei chief financial officer Meng Wanzhou in relation to fraud charges (Proctor 2020) was vocally met with similar sharp criticisms, with some accusing Canada of being "a naïve American lapdog" (Hopper 2019) that knowingly entangled itself in a "bitter rivalry" (Wu 2020) between Washington and Beijing. Canada has also been characterized as the sole responsible party (ibid.) for the current state of Canada-China relations (i.e., by "choosing a side"), despite the fact that the PRC leadership itself had a clear choice on how to respond to Meng's arrest (it ultimately decided to retaliate, beginning with the arrest of two Canadians in China; see Russell 2020).

Foreign policy analysts concerned about the interests of their states will likely be frustrated by this kind of characterization. Not only does relying solely on this argument require one to conclude there would be no or significantly fewer bilateral issues between various states and China if this strategic rivalry did not exist, it also removes agency from middle powers to make interest-based foreign policy decisions. Furthermore, it also ignores the fact that there are sometimes ideological or normative benefits to choosing a certain power, especially in the case of issues of national importance (e.g., national security, protecting democratic values, etc.).

This paper questions whether the US-China strategic rivalry should be used as a means to characterize bilateral challenges with the PRC or as an “excuse” for dismissing concerns about them. To shed light on this issue, it is useful to breakdown the logic being employed, the way this logic is problematic, and ultimately, why it serves to benefit China

## What Is the Logic Being Employed?

The (problematic) logic being employed in relation to the above points is as follows: Middle powers (for lack of a better term) are increasingly being “pushed” to take sides in this rivalry by either the US or China. This “push” is leading to increased friction and pain for some of these powers. Furthermore, certain states are being “trapped” between the interests of the US and China, thereby reducing their room to manoeuvre (e.g., on issues such as 5G vendors, engagement with Chinese military-affiliated universities, scientific collaboration, etc.).

While this logic is not completely without merit, to solely characterize the challenges many countries face with China in such simplistic terms requires largely accepting the following unsatisfying conclusions to some degree:

- All other things being equal, if the US-China strategic rivalry did not exist in the current state, there would be no, or significantly fewer, bilateral issues between various states and the PRC;
- Middle powers are not capable of making values- or interest-based foreign policy decisions, and only support either the US or China by taking specific public policy stances (e.g., about critical infrastructure and “trusted service providers”); and
- There is no clear ideological or normative benefit to choosing one power over the other on critical issues of national importance.

Unhelpful in this discourse are repeated and vocal assertions (Liu 2020; *Global Times* 2020) by Chinese state media and government officials (*China Daily* 2020a, 2020b) hinting that the US is deliberately placing middle powers in difficult diplomatic situations (Scherer 2020) by pushing back on some

of the problematic behaviours noted above. Often accompanying these assertions is a fixation on the current US presidential administration and its particular brand of foreign policy.

While it is true that US policy toward China has been decidedly more pointed under the Trump administration, there is broad bilateral consensus in the US regarding the threats the PRC poses to US and Western interests. Efforts to push back on China's "bad behaviour" have preceded this presidency (Sevastopulo, Dyer, and Mitchell 2016), and will likely persist regardless of the result in November of this year.

Notably, this paper does not argue that a US-China strategic rivalry does not exist, or that it does not have an impact on the international system. Regardless of whether or not one believes China to be a revisionist power, it is clear that a strategic rivalry does in fact exist; the US government itself typifies China as a "long-term strategic competitor" (Perthes 2020). It is also clear that countries that share US values but want to take advantage of the so-called "China opportunity" are being forced to ask uncomfortable questions in the face of increasingly problematic PRC state behaviour (Beitelman 2020).

In recent years, bipartisan consensus in the US has coalesced around "pushing back" against certain PRC diplomatic, trade, and security practices. US policy-makers, both Democrat and Republican, are also seeking avenues for reciprocity and equal treatment for US entities in China. This push is in the face of increasingly disconcerting Chinese national security legislation and at times unpredictable behaviour by Chinese authorities, designed to "punish" certain countries (e.g., recent restrictions on Australian wine and Canadian canola).

China is also aggressively attempting to reframe debates over global norms and establish parallel institutions to those established by the West, while simultaneously seeking to build its own influence in international organizations in a manner that suits its desired public image and policy interests. In doing so, China is challenging relationships and norms the Western world has taken for granted for decades, for example in the areas of trade, human rights, finance, foreign affairs, technological innovation, and public governance (more recently including the internet; see O'Brien 2019).

## Why Is This Logic Problematic?

All things being equal, even if the US and China were somehow not in a period of strategic competition, it is highly unlikely that middle powers would be able to fully ignore PRC-related challenges. It would be inadvisable to conclude, as some commentators appear to have done, that bilateral issues with China would not exist if not for highly visible dustups (e.g., the arrest of Meng Wanzhou, subsequent restrictions on Canadian products and retaliato-

ry arrests, US-China trade challenges and the issue of a lack of reciprocity for US companies in China, etc.). While these events have propelled the “China problem” to the forefront of foreign policy watchers’ minds, they are simply catalysts that have enabled discussion regarding an uncomfortable truth (Olsen 2019) known for some time: China poses significant challenges to the global West, and these challenges have largely been purposefully ignored due to a misplaced belief that unfettered engagement would greatly enable China’s political and economic liberalization.

To accept that China has not for years posed challenges for liberal democracies in the face of well-documented examples of research and intellectual property theft (Joske 2020), state-sponsored cyber intrusion campaigns (FBI 2020), foreign interference efforts (Searight 2020), and human rights concerns (Amnesty International 2020) would be ignorant. Of course, Chinese authorities respond to the above assertions with a mixture of denial and “whataboutism,” i.e., highlighting certain types of problematic US or Western behaviour as an excuse to behave poorly or dismiss legitimate concerns about China. This should be recognized for what it is: a distraction tactic meant to deflect attention from real problems.



*China poses significant challenges to the global West, and these challenges have largely been purposefully ignored.*

Middle powers have publicly disagreed with US policy and have lived to tell the tale and celebrate long-lasting and productive relationships with the country (Canada’s resistance to sending troops to support US actions in Iraq is often cited as an example). While sometimes dependent on the nature of a specific US administration, middle powers that share overall congruous value systems and interests with the US tend to face less harsh or, arguably, more proportionate and/or appropriate “punishment” from the country. More importantly, it is arguably less likely that middle powers are considered flatly “anti-US” for not always seeing eye-to-eye with the US government on specific issues (this, of course, can depend on the severity of the disagreement and power in question).

China, in contrast, appears now to want all middle powers across multiple regions (or commentators and/or representatives from these countries) to believe that by having any legitimate concerns about issues such as Chinese foreign interference, the country’s actions in the South China Sea, the retention of data in China, and the fate of foreign nationals in Hong Kong (among others) is firmly “anti-PRC” behaviour (Xinhua 2020b) rooted in a “Cold War

mentality” (Packham and Westbrook 2018) that interferes in its “internal affairs” (Xinhua 2020a). Also complicating this equation is the fact that by abiding by their legal agreements with other countries on issues China does not necessarily agree with (e.g., the potential extradition of Meng Wanzhou), middle powers risk drawing the intense ire of Beijing.

Thus, China appears to have taken a “no holds barred” approach in recent years, taking aggressive steps to highlight its displeasure in a manner one does not usually expect of the modern US, for example via the use of hostage diplomacy. This playbook is not new – prior to the detention of Michael Kovrig and Michael Spavor in retaliation for Ms. Meng’s arrest, China had already tried to twist Canada’s arm on the extradition of another Chinese national to the US by arresting Canadians Kevin and Julia Garratt in 2014 (Burton 2014). China also detained an Australian writer in 2019 (Elsworthy 2019) in a time of tense bilateral relations between Canberra and Beijing, following open allegations of PRC interference in Australia and the enacting of new foreign interference laws in the country, broadly seen as an attempt to curtail Chinese interference activities. More recently, in early September 2020, Chinese authorities detained and accused a Chinese Australian business journalist of “endangering national security,” potentially in relation to ongoing tensions between Canberra and Beijing (BBC 2020).



*China appears to have taken a “no holds barred” approach in recent years.*

The message has been clear here: Upsetting China carries serious consequences. Despite these challenges, several countries have collectively chosen to take the courage to stand up and advocate for their values, for example by making declarations about Chinese activities in Xinjiang and Hong Kong (HRW 2019; Jackson 2020). By doing so in this collaborative manner, these countries have upped the cost for Beijing to partake in repercussions – a reality which the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) likely finds extremely inconvenient.

Despite China’s protestations, choosing not to follow the path of the US or China does not make middle powers either “anti-US” or “anti-China” as long as decisions are made on the basis of the fundamental values and interests of these middle powers. For example, a decision by a country like Australia, the United Kingdom, or India to prevent entities such as Huawei from fully operating in their critical 5G telecommunications infrastructure due to issues of national interest and/or fact-based concerns about Chinese intelligence collection and data usage does not make them “anti-China” or “pro-US” – it simply makes them principled.

For some countries, there is a clear alignment of values and/or interests with either China or the US. On key issues, it is clear that liberal democracies unquestionably share inviolable core values and interests (e.g., democratic governance, freedom of speech, freedom of choice, etc.) with the US that are flatly rejected by China. To its credit, the CCP has worked hard at growing its influence with key members of the international community, including countries that largely share core US values and are traditionally considered American partners. The Party has done so despite there being a general incongruence of key values between these countries and China.

It is important to note here that engagement with China is not inherently “bad” or to be completely avoided. On the contrary, there are shared areas of mutual cooperation that many middle powers want to pursue with China, for example in the realm of reducing pollution and harmful emissions, and combating global climate change. Middle powers should be able to pursue these opportunities; however, they should do so with “eyes wide open,” devoid of naiveté and within a clear rules-based framework that can be enforced (e.g., adequate investment screening mechanisms, foreign interference legislation, etc.).

Middle powers must also be cognizant that while engagement with China offers opportunities, it also presents clear risks. States should be aware that it is in this space where their interests can sometimes diverge from their values; engaging with the PRC in specific ways does arguably ultimately support the CCP’s legitimacy and lends support to its non-democratic regime and governance model. Engagement with the US presents reduced risks in this regard; this being said, middle powers may still seek to engage with China in specific areas of cooperation while fully recognizing the above facts and determining whether tangible benefits outweigh risks.

## Why Does This Logic Benefit the PRC?

Solely blaming this strategic rivalry for bilateral challenges and concerns is in essence a convenient excuse that ignores the complexity of a relationship with China. Ignoring this complexity in favour of a simplified yet ultimately flawed understanding of why middle powers should be concerned about China (i.e., the argument that the US is trying to push countries to be “anti-PRC” on solely ideological grounds) benefits China’s leadership and falls into the trap of Chinese propaganda.

An example of this simplified logic in action involves arguing that discussions surrounding issues such as Chinese foreign interference, state-sponsored technology and intellectual property theft, as well as risks posed by China’s private sector giants are simply part of techno-nationalist and Sinophobic US strategy to “keep the PRC down” (Li 2020; *China Daily* 2020b). By pushing

this narrative, Beijing is able to reframe the debate in simplistic terms in spite of real concerns: i.e., China is being “bullied” and prevented from succeeding out of US fear; risks related to China are overblown, and Chinese companies are being treated differently than US ones (another arguable attempt at “whataboutism”). This characterization ignores the security risks these companies can present given the nature of China’s domestic system, and at worst, seeks to avoid having a conversation about these issues at all. As part of this logic, China can also argue that core US partners should resist US attempts to build a community of states that share mutual concerns about Chinese behaviour (an outcome Beijing desperately wants to avoid), lest they become part of an ideological conflict (i.e., a “new Cold War”) which locks them out of the “China miracle.”

Middle powers should avoid this simplistic view, as it is both disingenuous and ultimately potentially harmful to the protection of the key interests of these states. While it is true that the US is striving to push back against Chinese enterprises and seeks reciprocity for US entities either operating in or looking to expand into China, this effort is almost certainly motivated by a desire to address particular legitimately problematic Chinese state-sponsored activities (e.g., cyber espionage, unfair subsidies to Chinese enterprises, and so on) that have negatively affected Western entities – not just in the US – for some time. Many middle powers share these concerns and are similarly seeking for their entities to be treated with the same openness Chinese counterparts are provided in the West.

## Looking Forward

A foreign policy which refutes the simplicity of a US-China strategic rivalry as the starting and end point for framing challenges with China and which instead protects and promotes the fundamental democratic liberal values and/or interests of countries such as Canada (democracy, free and open societies, judicial independence, equality, diversity, etc.) offers clear choices on a way forward regarding prickly bilateral issues.

Middle powers should endeavour to make choices in a sovereign manner which protects these interests most, and should not be intimidated by accusations that by looking to protect these values they are “anti-China” or “pro-US,” are interfering in Chinese affairs, or cannot work with China in other areas of low-risk mutual interest. Middle powers should also continue to seek strength in numbers and use collective engagements and declarations to signal displeasure with Beijing’s behaviour. Doing so puts the CCP on the back foot, while also lending credibility to concerns being raised.

There are ultimately going to be certain zero-sum situations that cannot please both the US and China. It should be emphasized, however, that en-

agement with both countries cannot be phrased in equal terms. While there have been attempts to liberalize, China largely has a closed-off, opaque state-capitalist economy and rule-by-law system with a high barrier of entry for foreign enterprises and low possibility for reciprocal engagement. The US, on the other hand, still mostly maintains basic principles of a free and open market economy with ample access and opportunity for like-minded countries. In contrast to China, the US also still maintains rule-of-law principles; this provides prospective partners with some comfort in knowing they can speak out about mistreatment and seek legal recourse, if need be.

It should be reiterated at this point that this paper is not intended to suggest that countries should not engage with China and only should engage with the US. Rather, it argues that engagement with China should take into account multiple factors, some of which are highlighted above. To protect themselves, middle powers will need to consider how best to reduce risks related to such engagement, potentially by enacting enforceable country-agnostic policies and/or legislation. Such policies can include stringent foreign investment review mechanisms as well as legal frameworks to protect the independence of local media (including foreign language media) and to combat legitimate threats from foreign interference. Information-sharing with key partners will also be important, as will coordination to address common threats and concerns.

In the coming years, middle powers will have to make certain difficult and uncomfortable decisions to protect key partnerships as well as their own core interests. In these situations, states should look to leverage their own values and interests to make reasonable decisions that enhance their prosperity while protecting themselves as much as possible. In the meantime, states like Canada should look to grow cooperation with diverse client bases around the world, thereby potentially mitigating damages caused by short-term retribution for foreign policy decisions that ultimately best serve Canada and its allies.

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## Endnotes

1. Note that this paper specifically seeks to address bilateral issues with the PRC, and not those with the US. While middle powers do have bilateral issues with the US, they are not the focus of this paper.



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# About the Macdonald-Laurier Institute

## What Do We Do?

When you change how people think, you change what they want and how they act. That is why thought leadership is essential in every field. At MLI, we strip away the complexity that makes policy issues unintelligible and present them in a way that leads to action, to better quality policy decisions, to more effective government, and to a more focused pursuit of the national interest of all Canadians. MLI is the only non-partisan, independent national public policy think tank based in Ottawa that focuses on the full range of issues that fall under the jurisdiction of the federal government.

## What Is in a Name?

The Macdonald-Laurier Institute exists not merely to burnish the splendid legacy of two towering figures in Canadian history – Sir John A. Macdonald and Sir Wilfrid Laurier – but to renew that legacy. A Tory and a Grit, an English speaker and a French speaker – these two men represent the very best of Canada’s fine political tradition. As prime minister, each championed the values that led to Canada assuming her place as one of the world’s leading democracies. We will continue to vigorously uphold these values, the cornerstones of our nation.



## Working for a Better Canada

Good policy doesn’t just happen; it requires good ideas, hard work, and being in the right place at the right time. In other words, it requires MLI. We pride ourselves on independence, and accept no funding from the government for our research. If you value our work and if you believe in the possibility of a better Canada, consider making a tax-deductible donation. The Macdonald-Laurier Institute is a registered charity.

## Our Issues

The Institute undertakes an impressive program of thought leadership on public policy. Some of the issues we have tackled recently include:

- Aboriginal people and the management of our natural resources;
- Making Canada’s justice system more fair and efficient;
- Defending Canada’s innovators and creators;
- Controlling government debt at all levels;
- Advancing Canada’s interests abroad;
- Ottawa’s regulation of foreign investment; and
- How to fix Canadian health care.

*constructive* *important* *forward-thinking*  
*high-quality* *insightful*  
*active*

# Celebrating 10 years

## WHAT PEOPLE ARE SAYING ABOUT MLI

### The Right Honourable Paul Martin

I want to congratulate the **Macdonald-Laurier Institute** for 10 years of excellent service to Canada. The Institute's commitment to public policy innovation has put them on the cutting edge of many of the country's most pressing policy debates. The Institute works in a persistent and constructive way to present new and insightful ideas about how to best achieve Canada's potential and to produce a better and more just country. Canada is better for the forward-thinking, research-based perspectives that the **Macdonald-Laurier Institute** brings to our most critical issues.

### The Honourable Jody Wilson-Raybould

The **Macdonald-Laurier Institute** has been active in the field of Indigenous public policy, building a fine tradition of working with Indigenous organizations, promoting Indigenous thinkers and encouraging innovative, Indigenous-led solutions to the challenges of 21<sup>st</sup> century Canada. I congratulate **MLI** on its 10 productive and constructive years and look forward to continuing to learn more about the Institute's fine work in the field.

### The Honourable Irwin Cotler

May I congratulate **MLI** for a decade of exemplary leadership on national and international issues. Through high-quality research and analysis, **MLI** has made a significant contribution to Canadian public discourse and policy development. With the global resurgence of authoritarianism and illiberal populism, such work is as timely as it is important. I wish you continued success in the years to come.

### The Honourable Pierre Poilievre

The **Macdonald-Laurier Institute** has produced countless works of scholarship that solve today's problems with the wisdom of our political ancestors. If we listen to the **Institute's** advice, we can fulfill Laurier's dream of a country where freedom is its nationality.

## M A C D O N A L D - L A U R I E R I N S T I T U T E



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