



Commentary

June 2020

Open Memo to the Special Committee on Canada-China Relations

David Mulronev

Preamble

In early March of this year I was putting the finishing touches on the statement with which I planned to open my then-scheduled March 23rd appearance before the House of Commons Special Committee on Canada-China Relations in Ottawa. But I put the draft statement aside on March 14th when I was advised that the Committee had suspended its meetings because of the pandemic, and that my presentation would be postponed indefinitely.

This came as a major disappointment, because, in its short life, the Committee, which met for the first time on January 20th this year, has done valuable work. In addition to hearing from government officials in Ottawa and Beijing who are directly responsible for managing the relationship, it has provided a platform for something that is both welcome and long overdue. Committee meetings quickly became a place where Canadians could hear alternative perspectives on China, something that gets us beyond the familiar and predictably pro-Beijing views of government,¹ the business community and their supporting choruses in government-supported foundations and China-friendly academic outposts.

Through its investigative work, the Committee has offered a public hearing for people who are critical of the kind of unthinking, “Comprehensive Engagement” strategy that has until recently dominated what little debate we’ve had about China policy. That’s been particularly welcome because the previously dominant pro-China narrative gave off more than a whiff of self-interest, dominated as it has been by senior people whose manifold connections to China are, shall we say, complicated.

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In addition to Committee appearances, we're now seeing a growing community of China realists use social media, opinion pieces and interviews to elbow into what had up until recently been a relatively closed discussion. What's been particularly interesting is that the themes and issues that are important to such refreshingly sceptical China watchers in Canada - things like China's "capture" of local elites and its penchant for foreign interference - are also being championed by like-minded counterparts in countries such as Sweden, Australia, New Zealand, the Czech Republic, Britain and the United States.

From my perspective, the opportunity to be part of this critical conversation about how we promote and defend Canadian interests in the face of an increasingly assertive and, at times adversarial China is something not to be missed, nor is the chance to be of some small service on an issue of national importance.

Unfortunately, almost as soon as the Committee had created this important new platform for alternative views, the pandemic struck, resulting in the suspension of much of Parliament's agenda. Worse still, there is little reason to hope that the work of the Special Committee on Canada-China Relations, like so much of Parliament's urgent business, will resume any time soon.

So, allow me to submit my statement in an open memorandum via the Macdonald-Laurier Institute, another important platform for alternative views about Canadian foreign policy. I think that my remarks mainly hold up despite all that has happened at home and abroad since I downed tools. That said, there are at least three significant issues that have already evolved beyond my sense of things back then.

First, although the May 27th court decision on "Double Criminality" in the Meng Wanzhou extradition process shows our judicial system working with fairness and precision, the decision will almost certainly prolong the cruel detention of Michael Kovrig and Michael Spavor, which is China's deplorable method for bringing pressure to bear on us.

Second, if anything, reasonable concerns about China's suppression of information relating to the outbreak of COVID-19 have been deepened by our growing awareness of China's malign influence within the World Health Organization and, indeed, within much of the rest of the multilateral system. This matters greatly to a middle power like Canada that has such a stake in a rules-based international order.

Third, although things were bad enough in early March, China has now doubled down on its repression in Hong Kong, and by threatening to impose national security legislation is completing its demolition of "One Country, Two Systems." This is a tragedy that resonates profoundly in Canada given our many links to Hong Kong.

Responding effectively to each of these examples of China's assaults on a rules-based international system will require significant reserves of Canadian courage and resolve.

There is still a lot still to talk about.

Let me close by expressing my strong support for the Special Committee on Canada-China Relations and my profound hope that it will be allowed to continue its important work.

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I would of course be honoured to be invited back, if and when, it resumes its work. Having now shared my March statement, I would happily relinquish any further claim on the opening minutes of a future appearance, leaving more room for questions and answers with Committee members about Canada's growing China challenge. Implicit in that offer is my hope that the work of the Committee, when and if it resumes, will have evolved, focussing not on what the past has looked like when it comes to Canada-China relations, but on what we will need to say and do to prepare for the future. It is a conversation that is already being taken up, with real urgency, by our allies.

It's time for the Special Committee on Canada-China Relations to get back to work!

Presentation to the Special Committee on Canada-China Relations Ottawa, Monday, March 23, 2020

There is a saying that truth is the first casualty of war. I have been increasingly concerned that truth is also a casualty in much of what passes for our Canadian conversation about China.

That's both a tragedy and a puzzle, because the opportunity to think more clearly about China – what it is, where it's going, and what its rise means for us as Canadians – should have been the silver lining of this extra-long year, which began with the arrest of Meng Wanzhou, in which China has dominated our news cycles.

We have witnessed China's cruel, retaliatory detentions of two Canadians, Michael Kovrig and Michael Spavor, and the arbitrary death sentences imposed on fellow Canadians Robert Schellenberg and Fan Wei. This should have reminded us of the recent and very similar ordeal faced by Kevin and Julia Garrett, of the ongoing detention of our fellow Canadian Huseyin Celil, and, ultimately, of the extent to which China disrespects all other citizenships and passports, even reaching across borders to snatch people at will.

Unfortunately, powerful and influential Canadians, people who should know better, have described China's hostage diplomacy as a reasonable quid pro quo for Ms. Meng's lawful arrest, and have even suggested that the crisis can be resolved through what they describe as a "prisoner exchange."

Throughout this long year, we have had all too many reminders of China's long-standing and persistent efforts to undermine democracy and democratic institutions in Hong Kong. We appear to have forgotten our pledge in 1997, when both Britain and China were seeking such expressions of support, to do our utmost to promote the continuing rule of law in Hong Kong and the autonomy of its institutions. But in the last year we have been reduced to expressing the hope that some of those same institutions, now thoroughly infiltrated and corrupted, will simply agree to stop brutalizing the people of Hong Kong.

Canadians have also had regular reminders of the degree to which China has imposed its illiberal views and policies, and its very selective choice of language, on multilateral institutions, on corporations ranging from clothing manufacturers to airlines, and on purveyors of popular culture, entertainment and sports.

Among the objectives of this campaign is the effort to erase any mention of Taiwan, and with it, Taiwan's courageous embrace of democracy.

Words matter. I still cringe when I hear the term "Greater China Division" used by my old department to describe a unit whose responsibilities include our relationship with democratic Taiwan. Such deliberately misleading language only reinforces bureaucratic passivity and confusion.

Most alarming from my perspective has been our tendency over the last year to ignore, and by ignoring normalize, China's brutal assault on the Uighur people, its calculated effort to turn a vast region into a prison camp, to erase an entire faith and culture, using the immense power of a surveillance state to disrupt and destroy institutions right down to the level of the family itself. This is unprecedented, and says even more about China's future intentions than it does about its current disregard for human rights.

Throughout this long year, we've also been presented with examples of the degree to which China is engaged in clandestine efforts to influence and interfere in states like New Zealand, Australia, Sweden, the United States and, as the National Intelligence and Security Committee of Parliamentarians has warned us, Canada. Despite this, we have yet to require greater transparency of Canadians, including former holders of high office, who could reasonably be judged to be acting on behalf of the Chinese state.

The recent global explosion of the novel coronavirus should remind us of a great weakness at the heart of China's Communist Party, the impulse to hide, suppress and distort unpleasant facts, the reality that in a brutally top-down system, nobody wants to give the boss bad news. This is not a new phenomenon. It exacerbated the state-created famine of the so-called Great Leap Forward of the 1950s, and enabled the spread of SARS and the tainted milk scandal in the first decade of this century. As figures like the artist Ai Weiwei have testified, this impulse to conceal is also present in the public safety lapses and adulterated food scandals that regularly sweep through a now globalized China.

As we are learning to our cost, China's response to COVID-19 has been anything but "commendable."

The steady, almost daily accumulation of fact and evidence about a more powerful, influential and increasingly adversarial China should have encouraged us to pause and think more carefully about our own future.

I had hoped that, instead of the truth being the first casualty of this period of enforced reflection, we would instead consign to history the policy that has for too long prevailed in our bilateral relationship with China: "Comprehensive Engagement." This is the idea that any proposal for partnership with China is worth signing on to.

According to this theory:

If China, a state not known for its good corporate governance or its respect for the free flow of information, decides to create a regional investment bank, it is in our interest to invest without reservation.

If China seeks to gain greater access and influence in the Arctic, the appropriate Canadian response should be an enthusiastic welcome.

And if China detains innocent Canadians, we should describe it as a simple misunderstanding, saying misleading things like "friends get mad at each other," and by making it abundantly clear that we're willing to look past anything if only to get back to the status quo of comprehensive engagement, diplomacy on autopilot.

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The justification for Comprehensive Engagement used to be that it supported China's steady evolution into a country that was becoming more like us. Now the justification is more defensive, containing the warning that we will be left behind or, worse, punished if we jump off the bandwagon, or if we speak too frankly.

We also see efforts to compartmentalize China, the argument that we can push back at or ignore those elements of Chinese behaviour that now even the most persistent China boosters cannot ignore, while continuing to embrace what are described as the many unreservedly good things that China offers.

This ignores the extent to which the Communist Party presides over all aspects of China's engagement of the world, including the economic dimension. As we have seen, it is not afraid to weaponize trade, and, as recent incidents at Canadian universities have shown, there is good reason to be concerned about its influence over education.

I am very worried that although what we need is a root and branch review of our China policy, what we will get, and indeed, are getting, is a more subtle elaboration of Comprehensive Engagement.

We don't need to insult or provoke China, but we do urgently need a China policy that is smarter, much more selective, more honest and, frankly, more courageous. Let me leave you with four suggestions.

First, we need to remember that effective diplomacy should reveal the truth, not obscure it, and that the people most influenced and misdirected by the substitution of flattery for facts are Canadians, including well-meaning Canadian public servants, who take such statements as a licence to stay the course.

Second, the aim of any truly significant review is not just policy clarity, but also coherence and coordination in its delivery. This is an enormous task in an ordinarily disconnected bureaucracy.

Let me add that the player whose words and deeds must be most clearly and carefully aligned with changing government policy is the ambassador. Frankly, I am worried on this score.

Third, no profound change in policy has any chance of success if it is not owned and led by the Prime Minister. It is a matter of record that the Prime Minister has struggled to see China as it is. Unless and until he does, there is simply no chance of getting to the kind of purposeful and intelligent China policy we so desperately need.

Fourth and finally, there is no risk-free or cost-free option available to us. Protecting our interests, values and autonomy will come at a cost. But failing to do this will be more costly still. We were once a country that was willing to face up to such challenges. We need to find that courage again.

Thank you!

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About the Author



David Mulrone is a Distinguished Fellow at the University of Toronto's Munk School of Global Affairs and Public Policy. He served as Ambassador of Canada to the People's Republic of China from 2009 to 2012.

Prior to his appointment to Beijing, Mr. Mulrone was assigned to the Privy Council Office in Ottawa as the Deputy Minister responsible for the Afghanistan Task Force, overseeing inter-departmental coordination of all aspects of Canada's engagement in Afghanistan. He also served as Secretary to the Independent Panel on Canada's Future Role in Afghanistan ("the Manley Panel").

Mr. Mulrone's other assignments included serving as Associate Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs and, concurrently, as the Prime Minister's Personal Representative to the G8 Summit. Immediately prior to that, he served as Foreign and Defence Policy Advisor to the Prime Minister of Canada.

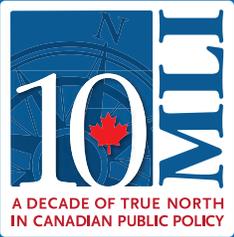
A career Foreign Service officer, Mr. Mulrone had a series of senior appointments in the Foreign Affairs Department in Ottawa, including 4 years as Canada's Senior Official for Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC). He served on overseas assignments in Taipei, Kuala Lumpur, Shanghai and Seoul. From 1995 to 1998 he was Executive Director of the Canada-China Business Council.

Mr. Mulrone joined the Foreign Service in 1981 and participated in full-time Mandarin training at the Canadian Forces Language School.

From 2015-2018, he served as President and Vice Chancellor of the University of St. Michael's College. He currently represents the Archdiocese of Toronto on the board that governs the city's three Catholic hospitals.

Endnotes

- 1 Let me distinguish here between the Liberal Government which seems to have, to borrow Ambassador Barton's phrase about his own past, "drunk the Kool-Aid" on China, and the professional Public Service, whose private advice to their political masters shows no evidence of Kool-Aid consumption. See: Chase, Steven. 2020. "Global Affairs warns Trudeau government about perils of deepening ties with China." Globe and Mail, February 26. Available at <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/politics/article-canadian-diplomats-warn-trudeau-government-about-perils-of-deepening/>.



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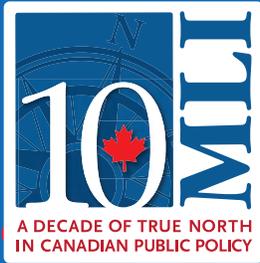
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