



UNIVERSITÉ  
LAVAL

## CRITICAL REVIEW

---

Massot, Pascale (2019). *Global order, US–China relations, and Chinese behaviour: The ground is shifting, Canada must adjust*. *International Journal*, 74(4), 600–611. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0020702019894991>

---

China’s rise to power has for long generated debate and tension on the global stage. As of now, its relations with the United States are rapidly deteriorating and Canada, like the rest of the world, needs to deal with this reality. In her article from the *International Journal*, Pascale Massot explains that recent transformations to the global order, U.S.-China relations and Chinese behaviour mean that Canada has to adjust its foreign policy and adopt an “adaptive, modular, yet strategic approach to China” (Massot 2019: 2).

The author first argues that Canadian policymakers need to abandon the traditional binary analysis framework when dealing with modern international issues. Divisions between liberal/non-liberal, ally/rival, good/bad are insufficient to provide in-depth assessments of the Chinese behaviour on the world stage. With the vanishing of the U.S. as a hegemonic power and, concomitantly, the U.S. withdrawal from multilateralism, the world cannot aim for a single, uniform global governance model. Multiple influential actors defending their own interests regarding global issues imply that each issue will respond by its own dynamic. The will to maintain, reform, or disrupt the status quo will not come as a set position for anyone. Thus, cooperation and confrontation will not be mutually exclusive. Canada, the author suggests, is in the right place to advance certain reforms in multilateral institutions in collaborations with China, while simultaneously remaining a fervent human rights and democracy advocate – values long defining the traditional U.S.-led world order.

Here, confrontation with China is inevitable. Canada can also innovate new strategies of global governance regarding contemporary issues like the governance of Internet, artificial intelligence or 5G. The goal is to elaborate politics with regard to specific issues, without simply seeking alignment with the traditional alliance network. Yet, in order to avoid “transactional, or ad hoc, foreign policy” (Massot 2019: 5), Pascale Massot insists on the importance to identify clearly what are Canadian interests on which issue, and in what priority. To do so, the government needs to begin a multi-level discussion, through official communications channel, academic experts, and civil society. Deeper knowledge of all the elements at play is needed to develop a sophisticated foreign policy.

During its rise to a superpower, China first benefited, then participated in the shaping of the liberal global order, but never embarked on a liberalization path for its political system, like it had been expected. Its recent assertiveness on the world stage indicate signs of disruption of that order, although not in every way. Setbacks have been observed regarding to the regime's increased authoritarianism, while there is progress when looking at the country's environmental policy and socio-economic development. In the United States, positions towards China are toughening on a bipartisan level. This signals that the country is not aspiring to passively influence China's trajectory, but is rather moving towards confrontation. The extent of this confrontation remains uncertain, but the return to a strategy of complete engagement with China is inconceivable, according to the author. Being so close to the U.S., Canada has already suffered a driving effect caused by that rivalry, which does not serve its interests. If policymakers succeed in identifying every stakeholder's core interests – by acknowledging all the nuance and complexity it deserves – Pascale Massot thinks it is possible for Canada to develop a Chinese strategy independent from the U.S.'s own approach. The variety of public perceptions towards both China and the U.S. – their fluctuation over time, age groups, and issues – reflect “the need for a more complex official China narrative in Canada” (Massot 2019: 11), that can adapt with time while enduring government transitions.

Pascale Massot calls on the necessity to avoid falling into an “all or nothing” attitude and explains it is possible to develop multiple different responses to address the Chinese behaviour. Diverging areas – like human rights – should not undermine the converging ones – like climate change. Following this logic, the author proposes four categories of responses Canada could use to defend its own interest in a pragmatic way: a) “let go,” which means abandoning issues not vital for Canada, like Chinese interior politics; b) “cooperate,” because certain issues, like climate change, cannot be solved without China's participation; c) “firm up,” if need be, Canada must not fear to adopt a hardline and meet tough words with tough actions, though still in a measured way; d) “challenge and engage,” Canada should join with allies and partners through multilateral institutions when Chinese abuses affect more than just bilateral relations. In conclusion, Pascale Massot writes that no matter which direction the adjustments in Canada's China policy takes, it must first start by “deepening channels of communication and increasing Asia and China literacy across the board” (Massot 2019: 12).

In general, this article has few limitations regarding the quality of the analysis. The author's proposition to integrate more complexity and nuance in a more modern China policy is hard to object. It is certainly true also many would wish to see Canada emancipate itself from the United States' clout when dealing with China. Here, Massot points out examples from history, yet as she says herself in the text, drawing parallels with the past is not always useful (Massot 2019: 7). Considering President Trump's character, is it realistic to imagine that Canada could contradict the U.S. on its China policy without suffering some form of retaliation from him? Another question comes to the mind of readers from outside policymakers circles. To what extent are any of the text's

suggestions not implemented or considered in Canada's foreign policy today? Since there is no specific description of the state Canada's foreign policy is in today to be used as a standing point, readers cannot judge for themselves objectively. They rather feel like Canada's foreign policy is presently deeply affected by an obsolete vision of international relations.

On the whole, the article is far from only being a criticism of Canadian foreign policy. It is rather solution-oriented and focuses on tangible means to implement its recommendations. As the article takes almost the form of a guide for policymakers, it would have been interesting for the author to add her own views about what Canada's core interests consist of regarding China. Although such an exercise would probably have damaged her objectivity.

*Written by Frederic Aube, Master of International Studies candidate (Université de Montréal).*

*\* Research supported by CRSH-SSHRC partnership network grant #895-2019-1000 for the RCDS-CDSN.*

