

China and the Changing World Order: Implications for Canada

By Dr. Paul Evans

Thank you Dr. Graham for the introduction. And thank you to the Canadian International Council (CIC) for organizing this important gathering of engaged internationalists from across the country.

The CIC, the Centre for International Governance Innovation, and the new Balsillie School of International Affairs are separate entities. But they all partake of the energy and dynamism emanating outwards from Central Canada, Waterloo in particular.

It is with admiration, envy and inspiration that those of us in other parts of the country are responding to these developments and attempting to raise our own game. In financial terms, the budget of the Waterloo institutions is like the US Defence Budget—bigger than all of the rest of us combined.

Even bigger, the meaning of “Waterloo” is changing before our eyes. We have a street by that name in my Kitsilano neighborhood and for most of my neighbours it refers to the place where Napoleon’s hand let fall his sword. In future it may be known to us as the place where a new Napoleon, equally dynamic, has raised his hand again, this time holding firmly a world-famous personal communications device.

As impeccable as have been the preparations for this meeting, I do have one concern about the montage of images that is on the program cover. The photos seem alternatively to be suggesting a renewed environmental consciousness of Chinese riding bicycles, a 1950s Communist monolith with a Russian superstructure hanging over a Chinese base or, above all, a Christian embrace soaring above both Mogul monuments and the best that Russia and China can produce.

We all know how important it is for the CIC to reach out to broader audiences, including conservative ones. But our subliminal messaging may need some improvement.

I apologize in advance for changing my topic and deviating from my fellow panelists. The social foundation of China’s economic system and domestic stability is a significant topic. Earl Drake and several other speakers have already addressed some of the key issues related to social protest, human rights abuses and growing inequality, as well as the response of the Chinese government that includes new measures for rural health care.

Listening to their remarks and the flow of discussion over the past day and a half, I’ll use my time for another purpose. I will turn the telescope around, focusing on issues of world order as seen by Chinese elites and what this holds for the rest of the world, especially Canada, in formulating a constructive response.

I confess to considerable skepticism about the analytical value of the BRIC concept for economic or political purposes. But if we focus on the other portion of the title that centres on “the dominant emerging powers,” some important issues come to mind. Perhaps we should redefine BRIC as simply a “Brilliant Reason to Initiate Conversation.”

A decade ago Gerry Segal wrote an essay in *Foreign Affairs* entitled “Does China Matter?” For all of the reasons outlined in Jim O’Neill’s presentation yesterday, Debra Stegar’s this morning, and what we all know about the remarkable power shift towards Asia and the rise of global China, today’s question is “What does China Think?”

A decade ago we were debating how China could be enticed into a constructive role in regional institutions like the ASEAN Regional Forum; five years ago it was how to connect China into existing institutions like the G-8 or the L20. Today we are not just discussing China’s leadership role in the G-20 but seriously speculating about China as the second half of a G-2.

The attention focused on the views of Chinese leaders is unprecedented. When Premier Wen Jiabao in London recently described China as a “great power,” it got international headlines. All eyes are focused on Beijing’s views of current financial markets, key bilateral relationships, and responses to pressing issues ranging from North Korea to Darfur.

But if we heed the economists’ projections and market trends, we need to be asking a broader question: what do Chinese think about the structures of world order including the implications of multipolarity, the role and structure of international institutions, and the future of the state system?

I’m in the midst of writing an essay on the views of two learned historians – John Fairbank and Wang Gungwu – on the past and present of China’s world order. They make two fundamental points. The first is that China sees today is not an international order at all, least of all *the* international order. Rather it is merely the product of the struggles among the Great Powers of half a century ago. Cold War, bi-polarity, uni-polarity are transient moments.

The second is that the order that these countries built initially constrained Communist China. But after Deng’s Open Door, that order has accommodated a remarkable growth in Chinese economic and diplomatic power. China may now well be a status quo power but it will work to alter that status quo to its advantage when conditions are right.

As many speakers have noted, the conditions are certainly more “right” for China now than even a few months ago.

The more difficult challenge is knowing what the preferred order might look like. It can’t be a reversion to the “all under Heaven,” Sino-centric, Middle Kingdomism of the Imperial era. Beijing is alive with ideas and there are occasional signs of both boldness and self-confidence in the discussion about options and preferences.

Where some see China as having a blueprint for world domination, I see these strands as rather more complex. The relevant historical parallel may prove to be the U.S. immediately after the end of World War II when American views of world order were also in flux. Hans Morgenthau, George Kennan and Walter Lippman emerged as the theorist, practitioner and communicator of a form of political realism that dispelled isolationism and idealism and laid the foundations for post-war American policy.

It behooves us to keep a very sharp eye out for their Chinese equivalents.

China watchers are at the ready. Barry Desker, the thoughtful head of a major institute in Singapore, speaks of a new tension between an existing Washington Consensus and an emerging Beijing Consensus.

The Washington Consensus is comprised of an emphasis on elected democracies, the sanctity of individual political and civil rights, support for human rights, the promotion of free trade and open markets, and recognition of the doctrine of humanitarian intervention.

The Beijing Consensus centres on the leadership role of the authoritarian party state, an emphasis on good governance rather than electoral democracy, technocratic approaches to government, the significance of social rights and obligations, reassertion of the principles of sovereignty and non-interference, support for freer markets, and stronger regional and international institutions as constraints on major powers.

Desker is not triumphalist predicting the ascendancy of one model or the other. While he sees the potential for conflict, he also recognizes the areas of overlap that can make for shared possibilities.

These are big picture matters that until very recently were mainly of academic debate. But the current shift in global power toward China, India and Brazil means that we need to think about them carefully and quickly.

From a Canadian perspective, two major issues are on the horizon.

First, we are important members of the coalition of victors who designed and have benefited from the institutional architecture that includes the U.N. and Bretton Woods systems. Are we prepared for a transition in which these institutions are either dramatically transformed or replaced? The Robert Zoellick injunction that China should behave as a “responsible stakeholder” already seems a little quaint in its assumption of who is in the stakeholders club and who defines “responsible.” In an emerging power configuration in which Canada and all of our traditional allies are in relative decline, what ideas, initiatives and resources must we generate to warrant a seat at the new tables of influence?

Yesterday, Sergei Plekhanov had a revealing exchange with Earl Drake about the significance of the new “BRIC network.” Professor Plekhanov lost the battle: the BRIC configuration is not a major part of China’s current international agenda. But in the longer term he may well prove correct: the discussions in a hundred circling camps of new international groupings contain within them the ideas and linkages that will shape the coalitions and institutions of the future.

Second, General MacNamara was equally eloquent when he spoke about freedom, democracy, human rights and the rule of law being core Canadian values. But are they any longer universal values? Do any of us think that if the “Universal Declaration of Human Rights” was rewritten today it would take the same form?

I am not making the case that we abandon our values or avoid pursuing them aggressively. But the civilizational and power context is shifting. Take multipolarity seriously and what Jonathon Manthorpe thoughtfully labeled the “North Atlantic value system” is a contender but no longer the bedrock.

All of this does not amount to a surrender of our values. But it does present a once-in-a-lifetime challenge to our imagination and determination in applying them.

Jeremy Kinsmen wisely told us yesterday that the function of the diplomat is “to listen and understand.” At a moment when our China policy has hit the rocks, our ability to listen, understand and *act* is a pan-Canadian imperative.

We cannot simply re-engage China or hit the refresh button. A new engagement strategy has to do more than advance our commercial interests.

It needs to take account of a new configuration of power, pluralist visions of world order, and a foundation of shared values rather than universal ones.

We have our work cut out for us.

Thank you.