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Summary Report: PRC Power Abroad and the Guardrails We Need Session 4: China's Toolkit and the Rules-based International Order

On June 23, 2026, APF Canada hosted the fourth session of its webinar series “PRC Power Abroad and the Guardrails We Need,” featuring Pitman Potter, Emeritus Professor at the Peter A. Allard School of Law, University of British Columbia, and an APF Canada Distinguished Fellow. The session was moderated by Vina Nadjibulla, APF Canada’s former Vice President of Research and Strategy.

What was said

The session examined China's complex relationship with the rules-based international order, a relationship Potter described as one of neither full acceptance nor outright rejection. For example, Beijing participates actively in international institutions and invokes established principles such as sovereignty and human rights, while also contesting how those principles are defined and selectively resisting rules that it views as constraining the party-state.

In his new book, [*China and the Rules-Based International Order*](#), Potter describes China's engagement using the framework of “globalized populism.” Populist rhetoric traditionally positions the “common people” against the elite who hold power. China represses this type of rhetoric domestically, but uses populist rhetoric internationally to position China, along with other developing states, as challenging the Western-dominated global system in three ways:

1. **Sovereignty as defence.** China frames its criticism of global powers not as an attack on others but as protecting its own sovereignty.
2. **Development as grievance.** China frames its complaints as a matter of not getting fair credit or support for its economic development.
3. **Collective rights over individual rights.** China talks about human rights mainly in terms of collective economic well-being, rather than individual political freedoms.

Potter argued that understanding China's use of globalized populist rhetoric is helpful in effectively engaging Beijing.

Key Insights

Beijing values the legitimacy of the rules-based system, but not necessarily the rules themselves. China's accession to the World Trade Organization is a cautionary tale. At the time, China promised it would transition to a genuine market economy, with open access to foreign firms, and that it would establish rule-of-law protections that foreign trading partners could hold it to. Twenty-five years later, those promises have not been kept.



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China uses globalized populist rhetoric to reshape systems from within. By positioning itself and other developing countries as standing up to a corrupt, Western-dominated global establishment, China seeks to reshape those rules to its advantage. For example, China resisted tightening the global warming target and a global pledge to cut methane emissions at the 2021 Glasgow summit (COP26). It also successfully softened language on coal from "phasing out" to "phasing down" to protect the country's heavy reliance on coal power.

Conditional admission and ongoing monitoring are key to effectively engaging China through rules-based systems. Bearing in mind the WTO experience, Canada and like-minded partners can use Beijing's desire to join bodies such as the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) and the Arctic Council as leverage, making full participation contingent upon meeting firm, time-bound, performance-based requirements and monitoring compliance with those obligations.

Canada must not allow its engagement with China to lend legitimacy to positions at odds with Canadian values, particularly on Tibet, Xinjiang, and the South China Sea. China has signed and ratified several human rights treaties, including the Convention Against Torture and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women. Framing engagement on these issues around treaty compliance, rather than as a values-based argument, has a greater chance of gaining traction with Beijing.

Engaging China effectively means accepting there are no shortcuts. For middle powers, coercive pressures such as sanctions have proven less effective than modelling behaviour: Canadian-supported judicial training programs and long-running law faculty and student exchanges once shaped a generation of now-senior legal professionals in China. These voices are constrained in the present political climate but could be influential in a post-Xi Jinping system. That payoff, however, will materialize on China's timeline, not Canada's — its system can sustain longer-term policy consistency in a way Canada's electoral cycles do not support.

The same holds true for companies operating from within China's system. China's state-mandated economic disclosures favour macro-level indicators generated for propaganda purposes rather than transparency, masking the local conditions necessary to assess a company's risk.

Rhetoric, even when used solely for political purposes, can bind the speaker to a limited set of actions. Potter illustrated this with the "common prosperity" rhetoric, revived under Xi to address inequality and wealth distribution. While popular with disadvantaged domestic audiences, it drew criticism both within China and internationally. However, because the rhetoric had become embedded in party language, it



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could not simply be abandoned; rather, China had to gradually transition to referring to a “new economic development paradigm.” The ability to identify party rhetoric and understand the constraints it places on Chinese policymakers can help strengthen bilateral engagement with China.