

DATA DIVE WITH NIK NANOS

# UNFRIENDING CHINA

A Commons resolution on Uyghur genocide marked the latest escalation in Canada-China tensions. Polling shows Canadians generally support that measure, and respondents appear game to further increase pressure on Beijing

OPINION

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Last month, the House of Commons passed a motion declaring that the government of China was committing genocide against the Muslim minority Uyghurs. This represents a massive escalation, in tone and substance, in our current dispute with China, and further erodes the political licence of any Canadian government to find a solution to repair Canada-China relations.

Average Canadians seem to be on board with the steps taken by Parliament. According to a survey for The Globe and Mail by Nanos, more than eight out of 10 Canadians support (61 per cent) or somewhat support (22 per cent) the Commons motion. This support cuts across all regions and demographic groups. When asked about how they felt about Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and his cabinet abstaining from the motion, about six of 10 opposed (41 per cent) or somewhat opposed (18 per cent) the abstention.

In the heady days of 2016, some touted that a new free-trade agreement with China would “spur a \$7.7-billion growth in Canadian exports by 2030 and help create 25,000 new jobs in Canada.” So much for the export growth and jobs. According to the University of Alberta, exports did rise in 2020, even with the pandemic, but most agree that the enthusiasm has been smothered by an accumulation of tensions.

The Canada-China relationship has become a grocery list of grievances, slights and tension. Back in 2016, the Chinese refused to agree to Canada’s demands to include gender, labour and environmental clauses in the potential free-trade agreement. In 2018, Canada – at the request of the United States – arrested Huawei executive Meng Wanzhou. The Chinese government has held Michael Kovrig and Michael Spavor since 2018. Canada has been ruminating on the security risks of Huawei’s 5G technology. In 2019, China slapped a ban on Canadian canola, which has since been lifted. Now, Canada has passed the Uyghur genocide motion.

If this were a Shakespearean drama, one might say “let me count the ways...” to articulate how bad things are between Canada and China.

It would seem that Canadians are game for even more tension in the binational relationship. A healthy majority of people sup-

port (51 per cent) or somewhat support (19 per cent) pushing to relocate the 2022 Winter Olympics out of Beijing. Of note, six out of 10 respondents (62 per cent) believed that the best path forward would be to work with the U.S. to impose economic sanctions against China.

At some point, Canada may very well slam up against the reality that a middle power such as Canada cannot poke a political and economic superpower such as China in the eye and expect a positive outcome. Liking a regime is nice, but not necessary to protect and advance our interests. Some of our close allies have had governments that were not liked by Canadians. Likewise, even Canada has been

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unpopular abroad in the past.

The current challenge is that there is no political capital to win or political licence to be given to repair the Canada-China relationship. The opposition parties understand that Canadians have hit a tipping point where they are, from a historical perspective, uncharacteristically belligerent against China. Being the leader of an opposition party is easy right now. When one is not the government, you can say or propose anything and worry after being elected about whether it makes for good foreign policy.

The Trudeau government is constrained both diplomatically and politically. It needs a cordial relationship to keep communica-

tions open while recognizing the increasing frustration in Canada with the Chinese regime.

Like all relationships under stress, both parties have to take responsibility for the current situation. Both Canada and China likely recognize that neither are in a place they wanted to be five years ago when they were trying to hammer out a new free-trade deal. It is an unanticipated state of affairs for both countries.

Most Canadians understand that ignoring or provoking the second largest economy in the world should not be considered a Plan A for any trading nation. The big question: How can Canada and China repair the relationship?

The biggest obstacles are not just the substance of the grievances but the public-opinion environment in Canada.

First, the mood of Canadians on China is tepid, with little political licence for positive action. To the contrary, Canadians today are more likely to be open to future escalations whether they be economic sanctions or focused on relocating the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics. A de-escalation focused on the economic trade-offs of poor relations with China can be a first step in starting a domestic conversation on the future of Canada-China relations. If Canadians want to scuttle the relationship, they need to know what the potential cost to the Canadian economy might be.

Second, the Chinese Communist Party needs to realize that antagonizing a trading partner pushes them away from China and further into the orbits of the U.S. and Europe. China has an economic interest in building positive capital with its trading partners.

The distance from economic prodigy to pariah could be quite short when consumers press businesses and shareholders press companies to boycott an out-of-favour country.

The challenge is that the toothpaste is out of the tube from a public-opinion perspective. Escalation is an easier short-term path for Canada and China but effectively is a disservice to both countries.

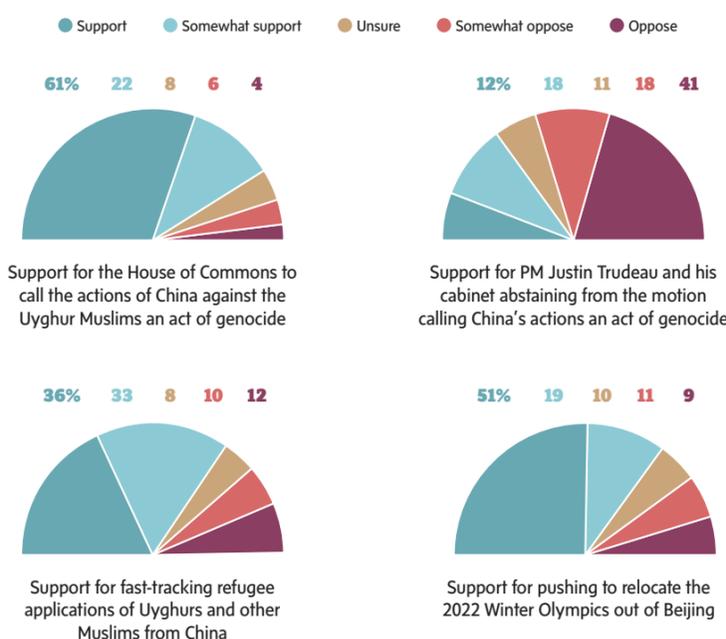
China wants Ms. Meng, the Huawei executive, released from custody. Canada wants the two Michaels out of prison. The path to even greater escalation can easily be visualized while the road to normalization is murky.

This column was based on a Globe and Mail/Nanos survey. The RDD dual frame hybrid telephone and online national random survey of Canadians ended March 4, 2021, and was comprised of 1,016 individuals. This study is accurate 3.1 percentage points, plus or minus, 19 times out of 20. The report with full methodologies and their technical notes are posted at [www.nanos.co](http://www.nanos.co).

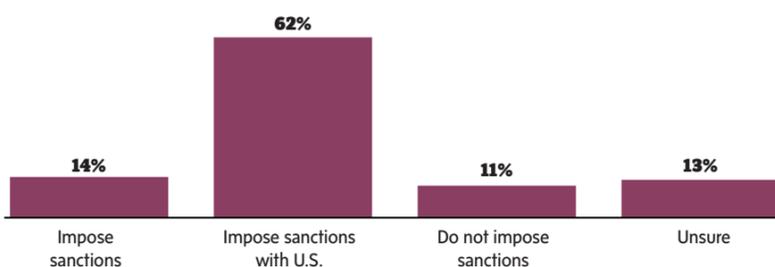
## Canadians on China’s treatment of Uyghur Muslims

### IS IT AN ACT OF GENOCIDE?

Support for calling China’s actions against Uyghurs an act of genocide



### SHOULD CANADA IMPOSE ECONOMIC SANCTIONS AGAINST CHINA?



MURAT YÜKSELİR / THE GLOBE AND MAIL, SOURCE: NANOS RESEARCH

# Whether on land or sea, China’s quiet encroachment is working

BRAHMA CHELLANEY

OPINION

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Emboldened by its cost-free expansion in the South China Sea, Chinese President Xi Jinping’s regime has stepped up efforts to replicate that model in the Himalayas. In particular, China is aggressively building many new villages in disputed borderlands to extend or consolidate its control over strategically important areas that India, Bhutan and Nepal maintain fall within their national boundaries.

Underscoring the strategic implications of China’s drive to populate these desolate, uninhabited border areas is its major buildup of new military facilities there. The new installations range from electronic warfare stations and air defence sites to underground ammunition depots.

China’s militarized village-building spree has renewed the regional spotlight on Mr. Xi’s expansionist strategy at a time when, despite a recent disengagement in one area, tens of thousands of its troops remain locked in multiple standoffs with Indian forces. Recurrent skirmishing began last May after India discovered to its alarm that Chinese

forces had stealthily occupied mountaintops and other strategic vantage points in its northern-most Ladakh borderlands.

China’s newly built border villages in the Himalayas are the equivalent of its artificially created islands in the South China Sea, whose geopolitical map Mr. Xi’s regime has redrawn without firing a shot. His regime advanced its South China Sea expansionism through asymmetrical or hybrid warfare, waged below the threshold of overt armed conflict. This approach blends conventional and irregular tactics with small incremental territorial encroachments (or “salami slicing”), psychological manipulation, disinformation, lawfare and coercive diplomacy.

Now China is applying that playbook in the Himalayan borderlands. The Hong Kong-based South China Morning Post, citing a Chinese government document, recently reported that China intends to build 624 border villages in disputed Himalayan areas. In the name of “poverty alleviation,” the Communist Party of China is callously uprooting Tibetan nomads and forcing them to settle in artificial new border villages in isolated, high-altitude areas. The CPC has also sent ethnic Han Chinese party members to such villages to serve as resident overseers.

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tries to seize the coveted area. Mr. Xi’s regime frequently uses civilian militias in the vanguard of such a strategy.

So, just as China has employed flotillas of coast guard-backed civilian fishing boats for expansionist forays in the South and East China Seas, it has been sending herders and grazers ahead of regular army troops into desolate Himalayan border areas to foment disputes and then assert control. Such an approach has enabled it to nibble away at Himalayan territories, one pasture at a time.

In international law, a territorial claim must be based on continuous and peaceful exercise of sovereignty over the territory concerned. Until now, China’s Himalayan claims have been anchored in a “might makes right” approach that seeks to extend its annexation of Tibet to neighbouring countries’ borderlands. By building border villages and relocating people there, China can now invoke international law in support

of its claims. Effective control is the *sine qua non* of a strong territorial claim in international law. Armed patrols don’t prove effective control, but settlements do.

The speed and stealth with which China has been changing the facts on the ground in the Himalayas, with little regard for the geopolitical fallout, also reflects other considerations. Border villages, for example, will constrain the opposing military’s use of force while aiding Chinese intelligence gathering and cross-frontier operations.

Satellite images show how rapidly such villages have sprouted up, along with extensive new roads and military facilities. The Chinese government recently justified constructing a new village inside the sprawling Indian border state of Arunachal Pradesh by saying it “never recognized” Indian sovereignty over that region. And China’s territorial encroachments have not spared one of the world’s smallest countries, Bhutan, or even Nepal, which has a pro-China communist government.

China conceived its border-village program after Mr. Xi called on Tibetan herdsmen in 2017 to settle in frontier areas and “become guardians of Chinese territory.” Mr. Xi said in his appeal that “without peace in the territory, there will be no peaceful lives for millions of families.” But Mr. Xi’s “poverty alleviation” program in Tibet, which has steadily gained momentum since 2019, has centred on cynical-

ly relocating the poor to neighbouring countries’ territories.

The echoes of China’s maritime expansionism extend to the Himalayan environment. Mr. Xi’s island building in the South China Sea has “caused severe harm to the coral reef environment,” according to an international tribunal. Likewise, China’s construction of villages and military facilities in the borderlands threatens to wreak havoc on the ecologically fragile Himalayas, which are the source of Asia’s great rivers. Environmental damage is already apparent on the once-pristine Doklam Plateau, claimed by Bhutan, which China has transformed into a heavily militarized zone since seizing it in 2017.

Indian army chief Manoj Naravane recently claimed that China’s salami tactics “will not work.” Yet even an important military power such as India is struggling to find effective ways to counter China’s territorial aggrandizement along one of the world’s most inhospitable and treacherous borders.

China’s bulletless aggression – based on using military-backed civilians to create new facts on the ground – makes defence challenging, because it must be countered without resorting to open combat. Although India has responded with heavy military deployments, Chinese forces remain in control of most of the areas they seized nearly a year ago. So far, China’s strategy is proving just as effective on land as it has been at sea.