The social foundations of China's economic system and domestic stability have attracted enormous attention inside China and abroad. Matters of social protest, human rights abuses, internal migration, and growing inequality, as well as the response of the Chinese government, including new measures for rural health care, are cause for serious concern.

What goes on inside China is indeed one of the big stories of this century. But here I will turn the telescope around and focus on how Chinese elite look outwards and see the emerging world order. This story might be equally important.

In some circles, there is an effort to place China in categories like the BRICs (Brazil, Russia, India and China) or emerging economies. I don't think either reflects today's reality much less what is likely tomorrow. Global China has arrived and the decisions of the Chinese government, businesses and consumers are not just reflecting the world economy but shaping it.

A decade ago, were we 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 G-20. Today we are not just discussing China's leadership role in the G-20, but speculating furiously about China as the second partner in a G-2.

The attention focused on the views of Chinese leaders is unprecedented. When Premier Wen Jiabao in London last year 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 and Darfur to climate change.

Perhaps we should redefine the BRIC concept as simply a "Brilliant Reason to Initiate Conversation."

A decade ago Gerry Segal wrote an essay in Foreign Affairs entitled "Does China Matter?" For many reasons that have to do with 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?"

If we heed the economists' projections, market trends and the shift in the global balance of power, we need to be asking an even bigger question: what do Chinese think about the structures of the world order, including the implications of multipolarity, the role and structure of international institutions, and the future of the state system?

Two learned historians, John Fairbank and Wang Gungwu, have made two fundamental points about China's view of the world order.

The first is that what 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, unipolarity are transient moments.

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

Amidst continued economic upheaval in the United States, the conditions for change are certainly more "right" for China now than even a few months ago.
The harder challenge is knowing what China's preferred order might look like. It can't be a reversion to the "all under Heaven," Sino-centric, Middle Kingdomism of the Imperial era along the lines chronicled by John Fairbank. Beijing is alive with ideas that are increasingly bold and self-confident in assessing new 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 United States 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 contemporary Chinese equivalents.

Barry Desker, the thoughtful head of the Rajaratnam School of International Studies 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 a 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. China's view of the world is evolving rather than fixed.

These are big picture matters that until very recently were mainly of academic debate. China is not just a country or a state – it is a civilization. With the rise of China and what Kishore Mahbubani calls in his book of the same title "the new Asian hemisphere," civilizational interactions are back. This time for the first time in three hundred years Asia is not weak but strong.

Canadian responses to these mega-forces have been slow, partial and incomplete. Individual businesses and institutions have had no choice but to adapt or wither. Surveys done by the Asia Pacific Foundation of Canada and others indicate that Canadians generally understand that something big is happening in Asia, while having mixed reactions about the opportunities and threats that come with it.

In policy terms, the Harper government has recently shifted out of an approach to China best described as "cool politics, warm economics" toward renewed re-engagement. It has not, however, brought forward an Asia strategy or China policy that connects Asia to fundamental Canadian priorities.

This is a mistake because the rise of global China raises issues much bigger than bilateral trade and diplomatic matters: the issues are our place in the world and who we are in a genuinely multipolar order.

From this 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 United Nations 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?
Here processes like the BRIC summits are actually important, not as a new power grouping but as windows on alternative ideas about the rules of the international system. 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, many Canadians including our Prime Minister are eloquent and forceful when they trumpet freedom, democracy, human rights and the rule of law as being core Canadian values. But are they any longer universal values? A philosophical argument has raged since the end of World War II about whether Western values resting on Judaeo-Christian ethics, Greco-Roman institutions and the experience of the Western state system should be the fundamental underpinnings of the global order. The philosophic debate will continue but shifting power relations means that the practical agenda has changed fundamentally.

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. If we take multipolarity seriously, what Jonathan 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 an unprecedented challenge to our imagination and determination in applying them.

As Jeremy Kinsmen has wisely reminded us, the function of the diplomat is "to listen and understand." At a moment when our China policy is underdeveloped, honing our ability to listen, understand and act is a pan-Canadian imperative. We cannot simply re-engage China or concentrate only on advancing our commercial interests. Our approach needs to take account of a new configuration of power, pluralist visions of world order, and the search for shared values rather than universal ones.

For a country of missionaries, we have our work cut out for us.

Paul Evans is professor and director of the Institute of Asian Research at the University of British Columbia and CEO Emeritus of the Asia Pacific Foundation of Canada. This note is based on presentations he made to two conferences hosted by the Canadian International Council. The first was on "Canada and the Dominant Emerging Powers: Brazil, Russia, India and China (the BRIC)" and held in Vancouver in May 2009. The second was "The World in 2015: Implications for Canada," held in Ottawa in January 2010.