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# Canada and COVID-19: the longer-term geopolitical implications

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## ABSTRACT

This article explores the geopolitical implications of COVID-19 for Canada. It argues that the pandemic accelerated changes that were already underway as a result of the Trump presidency. It traces the spread of the virus in Canada and measures taken to control it. Canada's response was markedly different to that of the US and the geostrategic fissures have deepened. The pandemic has played a major role in transforming thinking about U.S./Canada relations. Canada is now much more alone in North America and the world.

## KEYWORDS

Covid-19; Canada; United States; China; Donald Trump; geopolitics; foreign relations

## Introduction

Given how disruptive the novel coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic has been – and how global its reach has been – it is perhaps not surprising that there has been a burgeoning literature on the nature of world politics after the pandemic (Drezner, 2020). Much of the prognostication has been sceptical: Nye (2020) provides an illustrative cautionary analysis, arguing that ‘it is still much too early to predict a geopolitical turning point’ in global politics because the pandemic will not alter key structural realities that undergird contemporary great-power relations. Nye's scepticism, it might be noted, is widely shared, especially in the United States; a survey of American international relations (IR) scholars taken in May 2020 revealed that 54% of the 946 scholars who responded believed that the pandemic would not fundamentally alter the distribution of power in world politics (Jackson et al., 2020, p. 3).

In this article, I side-step the question about whether the pandemic will prove to be a geopolitical turning point for global politics more broadly. Instead, I explore the geopolitical implications of the COVID-19 pandemic for Canada, arguing that the pandemic accelerated a shift in Canada's geostrategic ‘location’ in global politics that was already underway as a result of the election of Donald J. Trump as president of the United States in 2016. While the pandemic may not turn out to be a turning point for global politics, for Canada it has already ushered in a new era.

While the administration of Joe Biden that took office in January 2021 is attempting to restore American global leadership, it is likely that the post-post-Cold War era will be marked by a continued slow dismantling of American pre-eminence in global politics – ushering in the kind of ‘post-American world’ that Fareed Zakaria foresaw a decade ago

(Zakaria, 2012). But Canada is already deeply implicated in the dramatic shifts precipitated by Trump during his first term. By the end of 2019, Canada was no longer in the same geostrategic position that it had been during much of the post-Cold War era, a location that had been marked by American leadership of a liberal international order in which multilateralism was widely embraced and great-power competition was not the central feature of international relations. Moreover, Canada's own response to COVID-19, markedly different to the American response, has deepened those geostrategic fissures.

## COVID-19 in Canada

The disease unfolded in Canada in ways not dramatically different from other countries. After the World Health Organization (WHO) initiated its own emergency operations on 1 January, the Canadian government activated its Emergency Operations Centre on 15 January, but few extraordinary measures were taken until the first Canadian case was recorded on 25 January, when a Toronto man who had been in Wuhan tested positive. Even then, the optimism that was evident in most countries about the novel coronavirus was shared in Canada. After the first case was reported, Canada's chief public health officer, Theresa Tam, tweeted that 'there is no clear evidence that this virus is spread easily from person to person. The risk to Canadians remains low' (Tam, 2020); she also endorsed the WHO advice that travel bans were unnecessary. Canada refused to follow Australia or the United States in excluding travellers from China, arguing that it would be discriminatory. As the prime minister, Justin Trudeau, put it on 5 March, 'There is a lot of misinformation out there, there is a lot of knee-jerk reaction that isn't keeping people safe' (K. Harris, 2020). Instead, travellers arriving in Canada from Hubei were asked to self-isolate for two weeks.

This approach changed dramatically when Canada recorded its first death from COVID-19 on 9 March and after the WHO officially declared the outbreak a global pandemic on 11 March (WHO, 2020). The next day, it was announced that Trudeau's spouse, Sophie Grégoire, had tested positive for COVID-19, and the prime minister began a 14-day self-quarantine. On 13 March, from quarantine, Trudeau announced a series of steps, including the closure of parliament for five weeks, limiting international flights into Canada, banning cruise ships until 1 July, and encouraging social distancing (Cecco, 2020a).

Following the WHO declaration, provincial and territorial governments moved to ban large gatherings and to regulate other activities. In some provinces, schools that had closed for the traditional one-week March Break were kept closed. Most universities moved to on-line instruction. On 13 March, the premier of Québec, François Legault, declared an emergency, limiting gatherings and prompting Montréal to close arenas, pools and libraries (Authier, 2020). In Ontario, the premier, Doug Ford, declared an emergency on 17 March, ordering that restaurants, bars, theatres, schools and day care centres be closed (Davidson, 2020). However, no province or territory embraced the kind of hard lockdown that we saw in France or in Victoria in Australia.

In anticipation of the economic disruptions that cancellations and closures would produce, the federal government quickly put together a package of measures to cope with the disruption. The COVID-19 Economic Response Plan (CERP) was announced seven

days after the WHO declaration. It included CAD\$27 billion in direct support to workers and businesses; CAD\$55 billion in tax deferrals to businesses and households; an increase in the Canada Child Benefit, a tax-free federal payment to eligible families with children; an increase in the credit on the Goods and Services Tax paid to low-income Canadians; an interest-free moratorium on Canada Student Loans owed by tertiary students; and a new Indigenous Community Support Fund for First Nations, Inuit and Métis Nation communities (Trudeau, 2020). Each of the provinces and territories introduced their own relief programmes for businesses and individuals. The federal government offered CAD \$14 billion in June to provincial and territorial governments that were willing to agree to working with the federal government on 'safe restart' measures (Rabson, 2020). In April, to forestall large-scale layoffs, the federal government introduced the Canada Emergency Wage Subsidy programme, allowing employers to receive a 75% subsidy on wages retroactive to 15 March (Ibbitson, 2020).

The federal government also changed its policy on international travel. On 16 March, Trudeau announced that Canada would turn away all international visitors arriving by air with the exception of Americans, flight crews, and diplomats (Cecco, 2020b). The Canadian and U.S. governments announced the joint closure of their land border to all non-essential travel on 18 March. However, because Ottawa wanted to ensure the viability of the complex supply chains across the Canada-U.S. border, many of which depended on truck traffic through many of the 119 land border crossings that dot the border, truck drivers were exempted from quarantine requirements. However, because some 29,000 trucks cross the border every day, the border continued to be relatively porous throughout the pandemic.

When the federal government issued an advisory against travel outside Canada in March, a number of providers of travel health insurance immediately announced that medical coverage outside Canada would be suspended or restricted, prompting Trudeau to advise all Canadians abroad to return home (Tasker, 2020a). In the following week, more than a million Canadians and permanent residents made their way home (Jones, 2020), many of them families taking March Break vacations, but most of them 'snowbirds' (as those who spend harsh Canadian winters in warm American locations are called).

However, little effort was made to control this massive inflow. Instead returnees were given 'border tips' jointly issued by the Canadian Border Services Agency and the Canadian Snowbirds Association that did nothing more than ask them to self-isolate at home for 14 days (Canadian Border Services Agency, 2020). While the prime minister threatened to use the stiff penalties of the Quarantine Act, little was actually done. Needless to say, there were numerous reports of snowbirds returning to Canada not self-isolating.

While social distancing and hand sanitisation was put in place across Canada quickly, the other component of public health in the COVID-19 pandemic – masking – was slower to emerge. Because the WHO continued to insist well into May that there was not enough medical evidence for the benefits of mask-wearing, and because there was a persistent fear that a move to mask-wearing would deplete supplies of medical masks, the federal government was slow to embrace mask-wearing. While the federal airline regulator, Transport Canada, began to require masks for all air travellers in April, it was not until mid-May that Tam issued new regulations, replacing the 'suggestion' that

everyone wear a mask with a ‘recommendation’ that masks be worn (Woods, 2020). However, it was largely left to municipalities to make mask-wearing mandatory via local by-laws, so that by the middle of the summer, mask-wearing in public places was widespread. Importantly, Trudeau himself promoted mask-wearing early on, even if the government he headed was hesitant. A mask, he said at a coronavirus briefing on 7 April, ‘protects others more than it protects you . . . It prevents you from breathing or speaking moistly on them’ (Elliott, 2020). While he immediately kicked himself for the phrase – ‘What a terrible image,’ he muttered to the cameras – it could be argued that the ‘speaking moistly’ gaffe actually helped ensure that in Canada mask-wearing was never politicised to the extent that it was in the United States (Van der Linden, 2020). While some Canadians tried to import anti-mask politics from the United States, the effort was both marginal and unsuccessful. A September public opinion poll, for example, showed that 83% of Canadians supported government mandates for mask-wearing at all indoor public spaces (Berthiaume, 2020).

Because Canada did not close down like Australia or New Zealand, but because Canadians and their political leaders generally took COVID-19 far more seriously than Americans and their leaders, the health impact of the pandemic was less severe than in the United States, but far more severe than in Australia, New Zealand and other ‘successful’ jurisdictions like South Korea, Taiwan and Hong Kong. By December 2020, Canada had over 385,000 cases, with 12,300 deaths (Canada, 2020). With a population of 37.8 million, the mortality rate was 325 deaths per million, well above the 35 deaths per million in Australia and 5 per million in New Zealand, but well below the 841 deaths per million in the United States (Worldometer, 2020).

The Canadian cases – and deaths – were not spread evenly across the country. As of December 2020, the north – Yukon, Northwest Territories, and Nunavut – have only had a tiny number of cases and just one death. The Atlantic provinces – Newfoundland and Labrador, Prince Edward Island, New Brunswick and Nova Scotia – took a hard-line approach to travel from other provinces, with the result that what is known in Canada as the ‘Atlantic Bubble’ suffered very few deaths: none in PEI, seven in New Brunswick, four in Newfoundland and Labrador, and 65 in Nova Scotia. Saskatchewan had 51 deaths and Manitoba 328. British Columbia had 457 and Alberta 551. The major centres of COVID-19 mortality have been Québec (7,084) and Ontario (3,663). In particular the cities of Toronto, Ottawa and Montréal struggled with renewed surge at the end of the summer and the reopening of schools, colleges, and universities; and, like many other countries, they experienced a very sharp spike in infections in October and November. Most of the deaths from COVID in Canada have been in long-term care facilities: when she delivered her annual report in October 2020, Teresa Tam, the Chief Public Health Officer, reported that fully 80% of COVID-19-related deaths occurred in long-term care facilities (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2020, p. 10, table 2), well above the average for Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries (Grant, 2020).

Because the United States is so central to Canadians, the differences in how the COVID-19 pandemic has affected each country played an important role in thinking about the future of the Canada-U.S. relationship. Mustapha and Van Rythoven (2020) put it well: Canadians watching the American response to COVID-19 ‘is more akin to watching a close friend spiral into a crisis of shockingly irresponsible behaviour. Not only

is their tragic circumstance a threat to the safety of others, but we face the added grief of knowing that someone we care about has chosen such a destructive path.’

## The geopolitical implications for Canada

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic broke out, Canada was finding itself in a radically different geostrategic position in global politics. There is considerable consensus among students of Canadian foreign policy on the factors that caused this disruption: the rise of great-power competition as a result of the growing assertiveness of the People’s Republic of China under President Xi Jinping and the revanchism of the Russian Federation under Vladimir Putin; the rise of authoritarianism and right-wing populism; and the corrosive political effects of social media – these are commonly mentioned. However, there is one factor that all agree have radically altered Canadian foreign policy: the rise of Trump (see, *inter alia*, Boucher, 2020; Burney & Hampson, 2020; Greenhill & Welsh, 2020a, 2020b; Juneau, 2020; Mustapha & Van Rythoven, 2020; Paris, 2020).

The distal driver of this shift was the political transformation in the United States that would bring Trump to power. Simply put, ‘American politics went insane,’ to use Rauch’s (2016) pithy but memorable explanation. Rauch traces the thirty-year process by which the American political system became increasingly dysfunctional as a result of growing hyper-partisanship. Trump’s path to the White House in 2016 might have depended on just 77,744 votes in three battleground states, but it was that ‘insanity,’ Rauch argued, that made Trump, and Trumpism, possible. For Canada, however, that tiny number of votes dramatically transformed its geostrategic environment, for in power Trump radically challenged all the verities that had underpinned Canadian ideas about global politics and Canada’s place in the world that had remained largely unchanged – and unchallenged – since the end of the Second World War in 1945.

Central to that vision was a global leadership role for the United States. As the Second World War came to an end, Canadian policy-makers, like their European counterparts, hoped that the United States would not retreat into the kind of isolationism that had marked the interwar years. Rather, they hoped that Americans would remain active in global politics, using the superordinate military and economic capabilities of the United States to maintain the security of Western Europe against the Soviet Union. The willingness of Americans to commit American military power to protect Europe and American economic capacity to rebuild Europe’s shattered economies was seen in Ottawa as the foundation of Canada’s security. Likewise, American leadership in shaping the post-war international order in a range of spheres was welcomed by Canadian policy-makers (even if they might have grumbled on occasion about how Americans chose to exercise that leadership).

A second verity that shaped Canadian approaches to global politics in the seventy-five years after 1945 held that in global politics Canada was always aligned geo-strategically with the United States. The U.S. was acknowledged as the leader of a series of interrelated military alliances ranged against the Soviet Union, and, after 1949, the People’s Republic of China. Thus Canadians were stationed alongside American troops in Western Europe as part of the contribution to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), a commitment that changed shape over the years but is still evident in how and where Canada deploys its armed forces. It was reflected in Canada’s persistent attachment to the

'Five Eyes' (FVEY) intelligence alliance that binds Australia, Britain, Canada, New Zealand and the United States.

To be sure, Canadian alliance 'followership' was never absolute. Over the years governments in Ottawa, both Liberal and Conservative, found reasons to diverge from the alliance leader. Moreover, from the early 1960s on, some Canadians embraced the idea that their country should more properly be neutral in world politics, caught unhappily in the middle between the superpowers. But, while we have seen the slow evanescence of the idea of strategic partnership (Nossal, 2011), from the broader perspective of seven and a half decades, what is extraordinary is the degree to which Canada – and Canadians – remained committed to America's alliances and American leadership (Jockel & Sokolsky, 2009).

Canada's alignment went well beyond security, however. A third verity was the idea that multilateralism and multilateral organisations were a crucial part of the contemporary global order. For Canada, as for other small states in global politics, multilateralism remained the preferred approach for dealing with global issues. The creation and maintenance of multilateral institutions – as varied as the United Nations, the Commonwealth, la Francophonie, the G7, the G20 – that are able to develop, through global consensus, a rules-based approach to global governance has been seen by Canadians and other small countries for at least the last seventy-five years as a crucial mechanism for resolving the conflicts that will always be a feature of politics at a global level. Canadians have likewise always backed American leadership in the creation – and maintenance – of the range of multilateral organisations and arrangements that comprised the global order of both the Cold War and the post-Cold War eras (Keating, 2013).

Trump's election struck at all of these core foundations. For the first time since 1945, American voters had elected a president who unapologetically and unambiguously called into question both the liberal international order that the United States brought into being after 1945 and America's ongoing role in maintaining that order. Trump was openly dismissive of NATO, both in public and in private; he appeared to think of America's alliances as little more than grubby protection rackets, where smaller states are assumed to 'owe' huge sums of money to the United States directly for protection provided to them over the years. In addition, Trump's open denigration of the U.S. intelligence community and his politicisation of intelligence jeopardised the FVEY intelligence alliance (Lapointe, 2020).

Trump was also unremittingly critical of multilateralism as an approach to United States foreign policy, believing that foreigners have basically screwed Americans over the years by taking advantage of the United States via multilateral institutions and processes. His inaugural address (White House, 2017a) announcing his 'America First' policy reflected those long-held beliefs. As a corollary of his antipathy to multilateralism, Trump was particularly critical of international trade. A confirmed mercantilist and economic nationalist, Trump saw trade deficits as indications of national weakness, and his 'America First' policy was protectionist and driven by economic nationalism. As he famously tweeted, 'trade wars are good and easy to win' (Trump, 2018). Trade wars with America's trading partners, both threatened and actual, became a defining mark of his administration.

But Trump's critique of multilateralism was not just materialist. He had also always demonstrated a long-standing preoccupation with being laughed at that went back to the

1980s, when he had bought a newspaper ad calling for a new approach to international trade. ‘The world is laughing at America’s politicians,’ the ad claimed. ‘Let’s not let our great country be laughed at anymore’ (Trump, 1987). As president thirty years later, Trump persistently returned to this theme. In his telling, the United States had been ‘demeaned’ and treated unfairly; other countries and their leaders were always ‘laughing at us,’ as he put it in June 2017 (BBC News, 2017; Bump, 2017).

It was thus no surprise that as president, Trump moved to abandon as many multi-lateral engagements as he could. One of his first actions as president in January 2017 was to withdraw the United States from the Trans-Pacific Partnership, a free trade agreement that Washington itself had taken a lead in shaping. He withdrew from the Paris climate accord, claiming that the agreement was ‘simply the latest example of Washington entering into an agreement that disadvantages the United States to the exclusive benefit of other countries’ (White House, 2017b). His administration sought to undermine the World Trade Organization by refusing to fill vacant seats on the WTO’s Appellate Body, a move that *Forbes* magazine characterised as an attempt to ‘vandalise’ the WTO (Brinkley, 2017). He seemed to take particular pleasure in disrupting two key summit meetings that always undergird the American-led multilateral order: the G7 and the NATO summits.

In short, in its first three years the Trump administration disrupted and destabilised global politics (Haas, 2020). Indeed, the speed with which America’s role as the hegemon was undermined prompted Saideman (2017) to wonder whether that hoary staple of International Relations theory, hegemonic stability theory (for example, Webb & Krasner, 1989), should not be replaced by a new theory – ‘hegemonic abdication theory.’ However, as I have argued (Nossal, 2018), Trump was doing much more than just *abdicating* American global leadership; he was actively *ceding* leadership to others.

The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated all these trends. The Trump administration’s chaotic response (Bowling et al., 2020) to the novel coronavirus pandemic – an admixture of denialism, obfuscation, ineptness and politicisation – was a key factor in shaping how the pandemic unfolded in the United States. The measures that were adopted by other communities – mask-wearing, social distancing and lockdowns of different varieties – were highly politicised in the United States by a president who refused to wear a mask, encouraged his followers to resist lockdowns, and continued to hold rallies marked by a lack of social distancing and mask-wearing until the very end of his presidency. It was thus no surprise that the United States, with some four percent of the world’s population, should persistently have approximately 20% of the world’s deaths from COVID-19, with an average of 951.8 deaths per day since the first reported death in February, and with weekly averages that spiked sharply upwards to over 1,400 deaths per day in November and December (COVID Tracking Project, 2020; Murphy et al., 2020).

The virulent spread of the disease across the United States had a major impact on American standing internationally. Many states banned American passport-holders altogether. Canada, which had originally negotiated a joint closing of the land border with the Trump administration for a thirty-day period in March, has extended the closure every month since then. Extending the closure yet again in October, Trudeau claimed that ‘The U.S. is not in a place where we would feel comfortable reopening those borders,’ and committed to keep the border closed until the United States had COVID-19

under control (Deerwester, 2020). Despite the loss of business from American tourists, public opinion in Canada strongly supported the prime minister's stand: one poll conducted in September revealed that fully 90% of Canadians agreed with keeping the border with the United States closed to non-essential travel (S. Harris, 2020).

The runaway spikes in infections and the high death rate produced another impact overseas. As Fintan O'Toole, a columnist for the *Irish Times*, wrote in a widely-circulated column in April 2020, 'the United States has stirred a very wide range of feelings in the rest of the world: love and hatred, fear and hope, envy and contempt, awe and anger. But there is one emotion that has never been directed towards the US until now: pity' (O'Toole, 2020). Fiona Hill, who had served as Trump's adviser on Russia, echoed that sentiment: she claimed in an interview with CNN that Americans 'are increasingly seen as an object of pity, including by our allies, because they are so shocked at what's happening internally, how we're eating ourselves alive with our divisions' (Yeo, 2020). That shock was nicely reflected in Trudeau's reaction when asked what he thought of Trump's approach to protestors. He paused for 21 long seconds, twice started to speak, and then stopped and groaned. Eventually he responded: 'We all watch in horror and consternation what's going on in the United States' (Tasker, 2020b).

The reaction of others in the international system at America's dysfunctional politics and chaotic administration had a mirror dynamic in the United States, however. The Trump administration actively avoided the kind of leadership that the United States had exercised in recent global crises, such as the Global Financial Crisis of 2008–2009, or the 2014 Ebola crisis, for example. Indeed, not only did the Trump administration refuse to take the lead in forging a multilateral response, but it engaged in a number of unilateral acts of abandonment. For example, it offered a German firm, Cure-Vac, USD1 billion to buy exclusive American monopoly rights to a COVID-19 vaccine (Hernández-Morales, 2020); it ordered an American firm, 3 M, to stop sending N95 masks to Canada (McCarten, 2020); and it refused to join a World Health Organization initiative on a vaccine (Rauhala & Abutaleb, 2020). More importantly, the Trump administration actively attacked the World Health Organization in a series of steps: in April, it suspended payments to the WHO; in May, it issued a series of threats to the WHO, demanding reforms, and threatening to leave; and in July, it gave notice of its intention to withdraw from the organisation in 2021 (Rauhala et al., 2020).

If Trump's retreat from multilateralism increasingly left Canada without its reliable anchors in global politics, Trump's other geostrategic moves also left Canada alone in the world. This was particularly true of relations with China. After Trump came to office in 2016, relations with the People's Republic of China grew increasingly fractious, partly because of Beijing's new assertiveness after Xi Jinping came to power in 2012–13; partly because of a growing consensus in official Washington that efforts to engage China in its rise to great power status were not working; but mostly because Trump's candidacy in 2015–16 had been in part built on bashing China for 'taking advantage' of Americans in the area of trade. As a result, in his first three years in office Trump himself devoted considerable efforts to 'making China pay' through the imposition of tariffs (that, of course, Americans, not the Chinese, paid for) and the negotiation of a trade agreement. In addition, the U.S. Department of Defense and the national security adviser ensured that the idea that China (and the Russian Federation) were 'revisionist' powers that were seeking a world antithetical to the interests of the United States was entrenched in the

2017 iteration of the National Security Strategy (United States, 2017, p. 25). The Trump administration also continued its long-standing dispute with Huawei Technologies, a Chinese information and communications technology company seeking to land a predominant place in the global market for the provision of 5G technology for broadband cellular networks. By 2019, the *Los Angeles Times* was characterising the moves against Huawei as a 'war' in which the U.S. was 'trying to destroy China's most successful brand' (Pearlstine et al., 2019).

Canada had already been affected by these efforts before the pandemic. On 1 December 2018, at the request of the United States, Canada arrested Meng Wanzhou, Huawei's chief financial officer and daughter of the firm's founder, Ren Zhengfei, as she was passing through Vancouver from Hong Kong to Mexico City. On 10 December, Chinese authorities arrested two Canadian citizens, Michael Kovrig and Michael Spavor, and have held them as hostages since then in retaliation for the Meng arrest. The very next day, Trump said in an interview that he would interfere in the Meng case 'if I think it's good for what will be certainly be the largest trade deal ever made' (Mason & Holland, 2018). While Trump may not have even been aware of the 'two Michaels' when he made his comments, his administration did virtually nothing to assist Canada in this case (Rauhala, 2019).

The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated tensions between Washington and Beijing, particularly after early reciprocal accusations about the origin of the coronavirus. Chinese officials claimed, without evidence, that U.S. service members visiting Wuhan for the Military World Games had brought COVID-19 with them (Myers, 2020); for his part, Trump claimed, equally without evidence, that the coronavirus originated in a lab in Wuhan (Singh et al., 2020). Trump then escalated his rhetorical attacks against China for the pandemic, calling COVID-19 the 'plague from China,' 'kung flu,' and 'Wuhan virus.' Indeed, Washington's insistence that the phrase 'Wuhan virus' be included in the joint statement of a summit of G7 foreign ministers prompted the summit to abandon a final communique (Simpson & Panetta, 2020). But the tension was more than rhetorical: over the course of 2020, Washington and Beijing engaged in tit-for-tat sanctions against each other (Ruwitch & Dahiya, 2020). For Canada, the radical escalation in Sino-American tensions during the pandemic highlighted the degree to which the evolving geostrategic environment leaves Canada vulnerable to the emerging great-power competition.

## Conclusion

In 2019, Chrystia Freeland, then Canada's foreign minister, admitted to *The Economist* ('Canada in the global jungle,' 2019) that one of her favourite books was Robert Kagan's (2018) *The Jungle Grows Back*, which argued that the liberal world order 'is fragile and impermanent. Like a garden, it is ever under siege from the natural forces of history, the jungle whose vines and weeds constantly threaten to overwhelm it' (p. 4). By 2020, Trudeau had promoted Freeland to be deputy prime minister and minister of finance, but the jungle she was concerned about in 2019 continued to bedevil Canada. The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated a geostrategic shift that had started many years earlier. The election of Donald J. Trump in 2016 confirmed Zakaria's (2012) prediction that the 'post-American world' would soon arrive, even if Zakaria could not have anticipated that the post-American era he sketched would have been ushered in by the U.S. president himself.

Such developments have left Canada in a fraught place geopolitically. As Paris (2020) has noted, the world is less rule-bound and nastier, and those developments ‘jeopardize Canadian interests in ways that may be unfamiliar to a country long used to a more benign international environment’. For Paris, and for many others besides (see the interviews in Ayed, 2019), the key for Canada in meeting the challenges of a post-pandemic world is to double down on multilateralism, to work not only with like-minded friends but to find, and work with, as many partners as possible. As Paris argued in a reflection on Canada’s disputes with China and Saudi Arabia written before the pandemic, Canada has the ability to rally support, suggesting that ‘it is not destined to be alone’ (Paris, 2019).

To be sure, the victory of Joe Biden and the Democrats in November 2020 promises to slow, and perhaps even reverse, some of the geostrategic trends identified in this essay. It is likely that a Biden administration will deal more successfully with the COVID-19 pandemic. But even if the pandemic recedes in 2021–22 with the introduction of effective vaccines, it is doubtful that the multilateralism that is so widely seen as the buttress of Canada’s geostrategic position in the 2020s will return. Four years of Trump’s attacks on multilateralism and his abandonment of American leadership will likely have longer-term consequences. Even if the Biden administration seeks to turn the clock back and tries to resuscitate American leadership and nurture the ‘garden’ of multilateralism, it is likely that the attachment to Trumpism in the United States will linger long after Trump’s departure. After all, over 74 million Americans – some 47% of U.S. voters – decided that they wanted four more years of Trumpism. We do not know precisely how many of those voters agreed with the Trumpian idea, so clearly articulated by two of his senior officials early in his presidency, that there is no such thing as a community of states in world politics (McMaster & Cohn, 2017), but we can conclude that this particular element of Trumpism will continue to run deep in American politics into the future.

Such a persistence of Trumpian ideas will likely continue to have an impact on American foreign policy. While the Biden administration may bring greater strategic coherence to great-power politics, it is likely that the relationship between the United States and China will continue its downward trend as a result of reciprocal and mirror dynamics in both countries. In the United States, Trump’s defeat will not lessen the broad bipartisan support in Congress and widespread support among the American public for a hard line on China. In Beijing, the continuation of a hard line from the U.S. will merely confirm the view that the United States continues to be determined to frustrate China’s rise, which in turn will prompt the leadership to double down on the ‘wolf warrior’ assertiveness and the appeals to Han nationalism that have been such a trademark of the leadership of Xi Jinping, particularly in the Indo-Pacific region. This will have major implications for all of the present friends and allies of the United States in the Indo-Pacific region, as they move to enhance their security in the face of the assertion of Chinese power.

And elsewhere in the international system, even those who might have yearned for a return to the era of American leadership during the Trump era will never be sure that Americans will not once again embrace a Trumpian alternative (Erlanger, 2020). It is likely that other states will increasingly find ways to ‘take our destiny into our own hands,’ as Angela Merkel, chancellor of Germany, put it just months after Trump’s inauguration (Henley, 2017).

If this dynamic occurs across both the Atlantic and the Pacific, as America's allies in Europe and the Indo-Pacific regions move to cope with security challenges in their neighbourhoods created by the collapse of American leadership, that will, *pace* Paris, leave Canada very much alone in the world. Because Canada remains so firmly rooted – by its geography, its history, its economy, and its politics – in North America, Canadians are likely to find themselves in the same geostrategic location they were at the beginning of the twentieth century. This was a world in which multilateralism and global governance were so rudimentary and undeveloped that words to describe these activities had not even been thought of. Instead, world politics was dominated by great-power competition. In this world, Canada might have been alone with the United States in North America, but that solitary existence was leavened by Canada's membership in a hegemonic empire. In the twenty-first century, by contrast, with the likely evanescence of all those multilateral links beyond North America, Canadians will truly be left all alone with the United States.

### Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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