

Opinion



U.S. President Donald Trump and Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, pictured June 12, 2018, at the G7 meeting in Charlevoix, Que. 'Politically, if we plank the curve, Mr. Trudeau will weather the minority Parliament and gain a majority in a few years, citing the need for a strong leadership in the face of rebuilding the economy. If he falters, the hard-liners' agenda will prove to be the wedge that keeps Canada a divided nation,' write David Carment and Richard Nimijean. Photograph courtesy of Global Affairs Canada

Where does Canada go post-COVID-19?

Canada's dependence on the U.S. will be tested. The idea that Trump would consider putting troops on our border, or that he would order 3M to stop sending N95 masks to Canada, confirms that the 'special relationship' is over. Free trade will continue, but Canada will look elsewhere for reliable partners as it develops its post-COVID strategy.



David Carment & Richard Nimijean

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As the COVID-19 crisis unfolds, Canada will engage in fundamental debates about its future—health care, economic strategy, the role of government in the economy, and Canada's international relations. In many ways, these debates will not only be between differing viewpoints on any one issue but on those who look to the past for inspiration and those who look forward.

Those who look to the past in many ways see the crisis as an opportunity to promote America's security agenda, including U.S. President Donald Trump and U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, in place since 9/11: tough on Iran, Venezuela, and especially China. There are many supporters of this view in Canada who prioritize defence, intelligence, and security above all else.

For them, the crisis is an opportunity not to rethink Canada's policy mix to deal with a post-COVID-19 world but to reassert political hegemony pre-crisis. Long ago, security surpassed development and diplomacy as America's main objective abroad. Call it the "Wuhan" or "China" virus. Bemoan the fact that critical supply chains are dependent on China. Blame globalization. Make America even more secure.

They oppose problem solving and cooperation and see COVID-19 as a policy tool to drive a deeper wedge between states rather than bringing them together. At the core is a need to ensure that America—and by extension Canada—does not falter, and that any

advantage that China might enjoy post crisis is weakened. For them, the social contract is premised on a self-help system: a strong economy is advanced by the state which allows those who are able to succeed despite setbacks.

Economically, we already see fears of growing government deficits and debt, even though by historic standards in times of crisis they are low. We see an emphasis on resource-driven prosperity rather than the development of a post-carbon economy.

We see the knee-jerk reaction, exemplified by Alberta Premier Jason Kenney, to slash the state (including thousands of public servants and nurses) because of the crisis, even though these are the people needed to survive the crisis. Meanwhile, he uses the same crisis to fund pipeline projects or promote tighter integration with the American energy market, as if climate change was something that does not matter or as if the glut of cheaper oil elsewhere, including the U.S., did not exist.

On the other side, are those who were already challenging this "narrative" for some time, but who are now catalyzed and more unified by the COVID-19 crisis. They don't represent a coherent whole and may never be able to reconcile core differences, but theirs is a rejection of the 9/11 interpretation of the world.

Partly environmentally driven—reduced human activity actually works—and partly driven by the view that confrontation is counterproductive to problem solving a

global crisis, this view seeks to invest more resources in health and well-being. This is an urgent task, given the widespread unemployment already resulting from the crisis and uncertainty about labour markets post-crisis, as social and economic behaviour changes.

If the virus knows no borders, we need better lines of communication through effective multilateral institutions, not nationalism that blames others while advancing narrow interests. We need more information and resource sharing to combat the virus and deal with the inevitable next wave of the pandemic.

Like it or not, this requires working with all governments, friendly or not, and not using the crisis to bash opponents or reign in allies—seen, for example, in the American musing of stationing troops along the Canada-U.S. border.

This is not just a rhetorical debate. Since many states will be weakened post crisis, the balance of power vis-à-vis the U.S. and China will rest with key states in Europe and Asia. Will they reject the Trump approach to the crisis and international relations? A rejection will partly be a function of the extent to which COVID-19 damages the U.S.'s social fabric and undermines the legitimacy of its leaders because they failed to protect these on the margins. It will also depend on how China behaves. Will it assert its authority, or will it build a cooperative infrastructure?

Justin Trudeau can learn from former leaders Jean Chrétien

and Paul Martin. They grappled with post-Cold War uncertainties requiring whole-of-government approaches and a recognition that solving a wicked problem requires a high degree of international coordination, political capital, and shared knowledge. To succeed, Canada will need to deliver its very best diplomacy in support of evidence-based policymaking on a global scale. If America reverts to its old ways, Canada will need new allies to fight the global pandemic.

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Politically, if we plank the curve, Trudeau will weather the minority Parliament and gain a majority in a few years, citing the need for strong leadership in the face of rebuilding the economy. If he falters, the hard-liners' agenda will prove to be the wedge that keeps Canada a divided nation.

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