

Policy

Brief

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Geopolitical Impacts of the COVID-19 Challenge

The following is a response to the MINDS Collaborative Networks call for thinking about the impact of COVID-19 on the global security environment, with a particular focus on the short- and long-term impacts of the pandemic on international relations and defence and security issues.

About the Author



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Summary

The United States has the potential to shift from being a security asset for Canada to a security liability.

The very fact that this potential exists represents a change in the geopolitical foundation of Canadian security policy and thinking.

The Covid-19 pandemic is not the cause of this change. Rather, the pandemic has been a catalyst, drawing together, consolidating and deepening pre-existing patterns of US behaviour at the domestic and international levels.

This development has the potential to change thinking about Canadian security primarily at the international level, but it also has implications for the national and regional levels.

Background

There is an important distinction between state power and state strength. State power is associated with traditional measures of military might. For the most part, determining state power is a straightforward exercise that involves evaluating a state's assets (military and non-military) and their ability to use those assets effectively to generate outcomes.

State strength, on the other hand, relates to a variety of factors that together speak to the socio-political cohesion of a state. Many factors come into play here. They include, inter alia, levels of political violence, the perceived legitimacy of the state amongst the population, the strength of and support for governing institutions (as distinct from support of the individuals leading them), and the degree to which national security threats are seen as existing at the domestic rather than international level.

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-DSFG, Boulden

One of the products of the catalytic effect of the pandemic is to lay bare the possibility that the United States is transitioning to becoming a weak state even while it continues its status as militarily powerful.

The United States may be moving from being a security asset to a security liability with these two alternatives situated along a continuum with considerable room for movement in between those two end points. The following discussion assumes that the United States is still close to the security asset end of the continuum but is no longer solidly positioned there, and that it may be moving towards the liability end of the continuum as a result of changes in its socio-political status that impact an assessment of its strength or weakness as a state.

Implications for Defence and Security Policy

Strong Secure Engaged (SSE), uses an analytical framework based on Canada, Canada's region, and Canada's international policy. That same approach is used here to evaluate the impact of this geopolitical change on Canadian security.

Domestic/National Security

Unless there is a significant and steep decline in the domestic situation within the United States that would bring it to the point of collapse, it remains the case that Canada's national security situation will not be significantly affected by changes in the strength of the United States as a state. Even as a weak state it is unlikely that the United States would pose a direct threat to Canada or Canadian territory. Even as a weak state the United States would continue to be military powerful, and would continue to view Canadian national security as an extension of its own security, not a threat to it.

Regional/North American Security

As with national security, issues of regional security are still likely to be dealt with cooperatively and jointly even if the United States moved further along the continuum towards weak state status. The ability to work jointly at this regional level is strongly desirable as it has an impact on each of the other aspects of Canadian security policy (national and international). Canada may, therefore, wish to augment its efforts to consolidate and strengthen the nature of this security relationship.

International Security

The most significant implications, at least in the short term, for Canadian security policy are at the international level. Here, the changing geopolitical situation in the US, has an impact on the foundation of Canada's pursuit of its strategic interests. These include a commitment to global stability, a rules-based international order and collective defence. All of these values have been under pressure in the past three years. The catalytic effect of Covid-19 has deepened the impact of that pressure by demonstrating that assumptions about US commitments to those same values at the international level can no lon-

ger be taken as given, at least for the moment.

Once the threat of Covid-19 and the onset of the pandemic became clear, the United States did not take the lead internationally, either alone or in concert with allies. It did not move to use, advocate the use of, or strengthen existing international institutions to generate global responses to a global threat. Indeed, the Trump Administration took the opposite approach. They blamed, threatened and undermined international institutions, made major decisions impacting many other states without prior notification, and in some instances undermined the positions of allies. While this behaviour is not particularly new, as evidenced by the US decision in October 2019 to withdraw troops from northern Syria without informing its allies, the open and active rejection of an international leadership role, and international institutions seeking to create a global response to a global threat, is a new development in the post-World War II era.

It is possible, even tempting, to argue that many of the changes in US domestic and international policies of the past few years can be attributable to the specific politics of the Trump Administration. This idea contributes to the belief that if President Trump loses the election, we can expect the US to return to pre-Trump policies and attitudes. That possibility exists but it is not certain that it will be the outcome. Even if President Trump loses the election, three factors suggest the limits to the idea that a post-Trump United States would result in a return to business as usual.

1. How a state does things in the international arena matters. The US treatment of its allies and its lack of involvement in key international institutions, issues and conflicts in the past four years can not be quickly undone by a change in leadership.

2. US domestic political concerns are significant and will not be removed or resolved by a change in leadership. The Covid crisis has crossed over domestic political fault lines including economic, racial and the state versus federal government divides. Each of these fault lines has been aggravated by the covid crisis.

3. The way in which the election occurs will matter a great deal. The Trump Administration has actively undermined federal institutions, as well as perceptions of the legitimacy of those institutions. The Covid crisis provides an added layer of complication to the upcoming election, and an added tool for those who might wish to delay or question the election process. How the election process plays out will be as important as the outcome of the election in assessing US state strength and US security policy after November 2020.

While much will depend on what happens in the next six months, the impact of the above analysis suggests that even leaving the upcoming election aside as a factor, the changing policies and policy situation of the US both domestically and internationally is having an impact on the global balance of power. In this respect one of the issues that has received considerable attention is the rise of China as a major international actor. When measured against China's, US military strength still puts it in a more powerful position. But the US decline in its state strength provides an opening for a longer-term possibility of change. The combined effect of recent events may prompt the US to reduce its role as global leader of ideas, alliances, and cooperation, either out of a desire to disentangle from international commitments or out of the need to focus more on pressing issues at home, or some combination of the two.

For Canada, this means that its efforts to promote and protect its interests may require a shifting of assumptions associated with the solidity of global stability, collective defence

and a rules-based international order. Rather than assuming a solid foundation and seeking to protect and build further on it, Canada may now need to focus on protecting what exists and re-building to recover what was lost.