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Assessing the Geopolitical Effects of the Coronavirus on Canada-United States-Asia Relations

Abstract

The United States' mishandling of its response to the coronavirus pandemic is an important indicator of endemic institutional, political and societal weaknesses. The US is a rapidly declining hegemonic power. China has also been damaged by its response to the virus but it is still on track to emerge as the leading power in the Asia Pacific. Canada must recognize what the Covid 19 pandemic is indicating

About the Author



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This paper addresses three distinct questions related to the geopolitical effects of the coronavirus pandemic: what is the impact of coronavirus on American global power and influence? How has the pandemic affected the rise of China? What should be Canada's political and security responses to the emerging redistribution of global power? The arguments of this policy brief are the following: the US mismanagement of the pandemic is the latest, and perhaps most consequential, in a series of significant failures by the US state over the past 25 years. These failures demonstrate that the US is an unreliable and unsustainable global hegemon. The pandemic has also damaged China's standing in the world. Even so, China is likely to consolidate its position as the dominant power in Asia within the next decade. Canada needs to accommodate American decline, China's relative rise, and the emergence of a multipolar world. Canada should respond to the changing global order by increasing its support for international institutions and develop a military capacity to protect its sovereignty. It should also develop economic and political relationships with as wide a variety of states as possible. Above all, Canada must avoid becoming embroiled in an American "new Cold War" with China.

The Effect of the C19 Pandemic on the United States' International Influence:

The US government's response to the coronavirus pandemic has been a spectacular failure. The Trump administration spent most of the first part of the pandemic downplaying its significance and refusing to prepare for it. When the pandemic hit American shores, the President refused to implement any coherent national response, refused to take responsibility for the chaos that followed, and then attacked the governors of different states and encouraged rebellions against essential healthcare precau-

tions, apparently for domestic political reasons.

“Most recently, all American states have begun “re-opening” their economies, despite the fact that at least 21 of them are seeing increasing levels of infection.”

-The Washington Post¹

The US government sought to divert attention from its incompetence by blaming other actors (notably China and the World Health Organization) for the severity of the pandemic. Most recently, all American states have begun “re-opening” their economies, despite the fact that at least 21 of them are seeing increasing levels of infection.¹

The core of American “soft power” lies in the idea that the US has appealing ideals and practices that “work” -i.e., they achieve a desirable level of economic and social prosperity that make them worth emulating. The US has been especially successful in exporting its national myths and self-perceptions around the world through its cultural industries. Along with “hard power” – American military and economic influence – these factors have provided the foundation for American global hegemony in the post-Cold War period. Nonetheless, over the past 25 years, numerous global crises have been caused or exacerbated by inherent weaknesses in the policies and practices that the US has promulgated. The US has regularly utilized military force and failed to achieve its objectives. Thus, the US failure to manage the pandemic must be understood as part of this larger pattern of hegemonic dysfunction.

Some of the more prominent examples of these failures include the following.

.In 1997-1999, the Asian economic crisis was the result of policies of global financial deregulation promoted by the US. In 2001, the US invaded Afghanistan. That war is still ongoing and is heading towards a US military defeat. In 2003, the US invaded and occupied Iraq. That war was illegal under international law, destabilized the Middle East, created enormous tension between the US and many of its allies, and resulted in an unstable Iraqi state. The occupation was also grossly mismanaged. In 2007-2008, the US was the epicenter of the global financial crisis, another example of American financial deregulation contaminating the entire global system. Under Republican administrations, the US blocked international progress on addressing climate change. At home, US society grew increasingly unequal, divided and politically dysfunctional.

In 2016, Americans elected Donald Trump as President. Trump's policy platform was based on "America First" and the administration immediately implemented policies that were hostile to the established multilateral and international legal orders. The Trump administration dissuaded immigrants from coming to the US, attacked NATO, withdrew from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), demanded the renegotiation of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), acted to cripple the World Trade Organization (WTO), imposed or threatened to impose tariffs against long-standing allies (including Canada), abrogated a number of major treaties and started a trade war with China that has now become an effort to cripple China's technological development. The US advocated an illegal "solution" to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, attacked the European Union, decided to withdraw from the World Health Organization (WHO) during the pandemic, and used its dominant position in the world financial system to threaten its allies into acquiescing to policies that undermined their own interests (particularly with respect to the Iran nuclear deal). In a cautionary tale to all

US allies, Trump blackmailed the Ukraine in an effort to get it to smear his presumed political opponent in the upcoming federal election. These actions sent a clear message to the international community that the US was not just an unreliable ally – it was also willing to abuse its privileged position in the world system to benefit itself at the expense of all other states. Beyond its foreign policy positions, the Trump administration also demonstrated a remarkable level of corruption and abuse of power at home.

Around the world, Trump is massively unpopular, though the international public tends to regard the US relatively favourably.ⁱⁱ However, the Trump administration's failure to manage the C19 pandemic is particularly revealing of how much American capability has declined because of political dysfunction. This is a powerful blow to a global power whose reputation is built on the presumed superiority of American innovation, industry and capability. The problem will not end with the end of the Trump regime.

The Trump administration is the culmination of decades of political and social deterioration in the US. Congress is meant to hold the President in check; however, extreme partisanship has meant that the Republican Party has moved in lockstep with Trump, no matter how far he has diverged from the established norms of his office. The Republican Party's rejection of global and multilateral norms has made it increasingly difficult for the US to be seen as a "benevolent hegemon" in the larger world. Repairing this damage is a long-term project and, even if Trump loses the next election, there is no guarantee that another Trump-like figure will not emerge in the future.

The US can no longer be seen as a state that "works". The fact that racial minorities in the US are disproportionately affected by C19 and the ongoing social protests over police brutality further damage the United States' global appeal.

The reasonable conclusion is that the US lacks the capacity to be a global leader. At the same time, there are no other states with the capacity or authority to take up the leadership role.

The Effect of the C19 Pandemic on China's International Influence:

China has not benefited from the American collapse as much as an observer might expect. China's initial response to the C19 virus was inept. Local officials in Hubei province concealed the viral outbreak for political purposes. By the time the central government became fully aware of what was transpiring, the virus was spreading at an exponential rate. Nonetheless, China's final response was highly effective. It locked down hundreds of millions of people in a nationwide quarantine, shut down its economy, and brought the virus under control. A recent outbreak of dozens of people in Beijing has led to the re-imposition of strong quarantine measures in that city, but it is likely China will be successful in containing the spread there.

China has been roundly criticized for its defective initial response to the outbreak. Much of this criticism is justified, but it has also become highly politicized and propagandized by both sides. By the end of January 2020, it was clear that the C19 virus was emanating out of China. Much of the world had the time to respond effectively. Many Asian states did exactly that. Vietnam, Cambodia, Thailand, Taiwan, Japan, South Korea and Singapore have all contained or completely crushed the disease. Many of these states acted based on their earlier experience with SARS. Yet many Western states, even with fair warning of what was coming, did not treat the virus with the seriousness it deserved.ⁱⁱⁱ

Even so, the "soft power" benefits that China can gain from its more effective response to the pandemic are limited. There are many countries that

lack the resources and infrastructure to duplicate the extreme measures that China took to contain the virus. Many democratic states have dealt effectively with the virus, demonstrating that authoritarianism is not a necessary prerequisite to effectiveness. Moreover, as the virus spreads around the world and takes more lives, international anger at China will grow and it will become easier for local governments to blame China for their own lack of preparation. China can foster a small amount of goodwill if it provides states with needed medical supplies but this cannot overcome the fact that the disease originated in China and became an international problem because of Chinese governmental incompetence. Many Chinese supplies have proven defective, a reality that has further damaged China's reputation as it tries to present itself as a good international citizen. Also, China does not possess the kind of "soft power" that the US does. China's "Confucius Institutes" are designed to explain China to the world and allay fears through understanding, but China does not have a universalist ideology it is trying to export to the world. China claims that it respects the sovereignty of other states and that it understands the struggles of the developing world, but these are not romantic ideas that inspire the average person and they are easily undermined by aggressive Chinese actions. Finally, as a matter of geography, China has numerous territorial conflicts with its neighbours. This makes them wary of a rising China and further limits and complicates China's global influence. The coronavirus pandemic heralds the emergence of a multipolar world, but it does not presage the coming of a new global hegemon.

The propaganda battle between China and the US around C19 has involved the spread of mutual DDSF disinformation. The White House has spread the conspiracy theory that C19 originated in a Chinese lab, despite no support for this position from US intelligence agencies.^{iv}

China has responded with its “wolf warriors” – Chinese diplomats who have launched their own clumsy but aggressive misinformation and conspiracy theory campaigns on social media.^v

Nonetheless, China does have distinct advantages. It remains the primary trading partner of most Asian states. US tariffs on China have strengthened China’s regional economic ties. Recent US efforts to ban US technology, especially microchips, from being used by Chinese technology companies may cause other states to abandon American technology in order to continue working with China.^{vi} The perception in much of Asia of the US as a capable actor has been damaged by the US response to the C19 pandemic in comparison to what China and other Asian states have done. China is at the heart of the region and it always will be there. On the other hand, the Trump administration canceled the TPP, indicating a lack of commitment to the Asia Pacific. There have been long-standing regional doubts about American staying power. If Asian states are forced to choose between the US and China, they will choose China. China may not dominate the region; the Asia Pacific has too many contending actors. But unnecessarily making China an enemy and relying on American protection is a bad gamble for any Asian state.

How Should Canada Respond to the Changing Global Environment?

In the short-term, the single greatest national security threat that Canada faces comes from the United States. The American failure to manage C19 means that every American traveler to Canada is a potential carrier of the disease. This is a problem that will likely worsen with time. Thus, the Canadian-American border must remain closed to all but essential travel for the foreseeable future – possibly until there is an effective and widely-distributed vaccine that most Canadians have accessed or until Canada and the US

can devise a reliable way to quarantine and test all travelers. Politically, keeping the border closed may be difficult, but it is absolutely necessary to ensure the health and safety of Canadians.

In the longer-term, Canada’s interests are diverging from those of the US. The C19 pandemic and the American response are clear indicators that the US lacks the political unity necessary to continue functioning as an effective hegemonic power.

“Canada must avoid being dragged into the growing American efforts to isolate China and undermine its economic and technological development.”

-DSFG, Narine

Admittedly, this will be difficult to do. The US is going to demand that Canada, its northern neighbor, follow its lead and not pose a “security threat”. The Americans have a very broad definition of what a security threat may be and Canada could easily find itself paying a technological and economic cost for defying American pressure. However, this may be necessary.

Demographically, Canada is changing. Immigration to Canada is essential for the country’s growth and economic future. For the past several decades, most of that immigration has come from Asia. Today, approximately 18% of Canadians have Asian roots. The single largest Asian demographic is Chinese.^{vii} If Canada cuts itself off from China, it will be cutting itself off from Asia. If, as seems possible, American efforts to cripple China’s technological development backfire and lead to more countries abandoning American technology, then Canada will disadvantage itself economically and technologically going forward.

Canada should pursue policies that diversify and expand its markets and economic/political contacts. It should not be following policies that increase its dependence on a declining hegemonic power.

In terms of security, this same argument applies. If Trump is elected for another term, US-European ties will be irrevocably damaged. Even if Trump loses the upcoming election, Europeans will need to remain wary of trying to resume a pre-Trump relationship with the US. US-European relations have been strained by two American Presidents in the 21st century (Bush and Trump). That is a pattern they cannot ignore. Moreover, Europe is intent on pursuing a more congenial relationship with China. If the US cannot accommodate that, then those ties will fray some more. The implications of this for NATO are unclear, but likely indicate a weakening of that organization's purpose and unity. If the Cold War Western alliance continues to unravel, Canada will be faced with difficult choices. NORAD and other necessary cooperation with the US can continue, but Canada should focus on building a military that can protect Canada's borders, particularly in the North, where Canadian sovereignty is most challenged by the US and Russia.

Canada's military can focus on supporting international organizations, such as the United Na-

tions. Most countries in the world support the institutions of international law and multilateral cooperation. A world of law is much more predictable and secure than one run by powerful states asserting their dominance over others through force and other coercive means. As a true multipolar world emerges, no one country will be able to exercise global hegemony. At the same time, global problems that require global cooperation will become more pressing. The paramount example of this is the existential threat posed by climate change. Under such circumstances, it is in Canada's interest to build and sustain multilateral cooperation and to resist fracturing the world into confrontational blocs.

For the Canadian security and foreign policy establishments, implementing some of these changes may be difficult. These establishments are deeply entrenched in an American worldview, borne of constant contact with the US and, in the case of security, training and building complementary forces with the US military. However, as Canada's experience with the Trump administration has illustrated, the country cannot afford to be at the mercy of an antagonistic American leader. Canada needs to build the capacity to act independently of the US. The future of world economic and technological power lies in Asia. Canada is well-positioned to benefit from this, but only if it begins to prepare itself now.

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