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by David Carment and Dani Belo

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POLICY PERSPECTIVE

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There is one basic truism in this era of geopolitical competition: the strong do as they will and the weak suffer as they must. But today, growing tensions between the U.S. and China, and the U.S. and Russia, place their allies in a difficult spot. This is because geopolitical conflicts involve a desire by great powers to fundamentally revise the order of alliances as well as solidify new norms of conduct embedded in institutions in which countries like Canada have made considerable investments.

In examining America's foreign policy agenda over the past 20 years or so, we see that even when the U.S. engages multilaterally alongside allies, its actions reflect a strong desire to gain the most economically and politically, even at their expense. Indeed, America's policy-makers consider retaliation against the U.S. unlikely because its market is too large and too important. This attitude based on U.S. exceptionalism is now being tested as America's claims to leadership in the COVID-19 crisis are cast in doubt.

In the sections below, we examine how we arrived at this situation and the implications therein for international security and American leadership in a post-COVID-19 world.

America's Exceptional Foreign Policy

American exceptionalism can be traced to the founding of the nation. On Sept. 19, 1796, George Washington warned in his farewell address that the U.S. should be averse to "entangling alliances" that would prevent the nation from achieving its foreign policy goals. The intent of his message was to ensure that America would reject the rules dictated by overseas powers and promote an independent foreign policy. This world view has been an unshakable pillar in U.S. foreign policy across history.

American exceptionalism is often misinterpreted. Simply put, as primus inter pares (first among equals) the U.S. decides on the exception, meaning that an American leader can defy the law to serve American interests. The Wolfowitz Doctrine, for example, which has been the foundation of U.S. foreign policy in the post-Cold War era is based on historic, deep-rooted, relative gains preoccupation – but contextualized for a unipolar world.

This preoccupation with relative gains has pushed the U.S. to unilateral action at an increasing frequency by pressuring allies to follow its lead in preventing terrorism, fixing failed and fragile states and more recently, challenging geopolitical rivals China and Russia through grey-zone conflict. In essence, since 9/11 the U.S. has become "addicted to security". The "security trumps everything" political culture has increased American propensity for unilateral action as leadership in Washington has become convinced that multilateralism cannot compel states to co-operate consistently and effectively against opponents. This deep-rooted conviction has remained unshakable as the world has transitioned away from unipolarity.

Obviously, U.S. foreign policy has been focused on security for far longer than the last 20 years. However, American foreign policy has become problematic since 9/11 precisely because it is creating fissures in alliances, alienating allies and undermining international institutions by privileging security over diplomacy and development. There are several reasons why this has occurred.

First, the building blocks of contemporary American foreign policy were not redesigned following 9/11. Rather, that event facilitated the emergence and legitimacy of new capabilities to pursue old ends. To be sure, the U.S. defied global norms it promoted before 9/11, but violations have become especially difficult to address in grey-zone conflicts using existing institutions, as sophisticated hybrid tools and tactics enable the exploitation of blind spots in traditional international rules.

Second, the security-first agenda has privileged kinetic diplomacy in accordance with the Wolfowitz Doctrine. In essence, U.S. strategy moved from the containment of threats to an engagement against adversaries pre-emptively across international borders. This shift in foreign policy priorities translated into more special forces on the ground and fewer diplomats. The U.S. has acknowledged that its forces are involved in secret missions, sometimes with foreign-partner special operations forces in an undeclared conflict zone. This is highly controversial and many of these partnerships remain classified. For example, in 2018 there were some 70,000 U.S. special operators worldwide, compared to fewer than 10,000 Foreign Service officers.

Third, the security-first agenda entails a continuous maintenance or pursuit of maximum relative gains, which requires significant legal, economic and political sacrifices domestically and internationally. These costly sacrifices include expensive overseas deployments, the decline of genuine multilateralism and the erosion of civilian oversight over security affairs. The increasing emphasis on whole-of-society approaches to addressing security threats results in a blurring of lines between civilian and security spheres, with the latter often consuming the former. Even though security-first may help mobilize military resources to address threats, a corresponding erosion of impartial civilian oversight over security interests helps promote costly and damaging path dependence in foreign policy.

Fourth and finally, Washington's preoccupation with unilateral action in pursuit of relative gains goes beyond confrontations with Iran, Russia and China. In today's multipolar world, America's intense rivalry with its adversaries has led its leaders to focus on weaker and smaller states where geopolitical rivalries are played out. For example, for those smaller countries that are America's traditional security and trading partners, there is increased economic and military pressure to stay the course. The goal is to prevent the defection of these allies as their economic and security priorities shift. Allies such as Germany and France engage in economic co-operation with Washington's adversaries such as Russia while attempting to maintain the benefits from traditional security networks like NATO.

For these countries, America's pressure tactics have proved to be a double-edged sword. On the one hand, lesser powers are now being forced to more clearly articulate their national interests. That is, they must choose what is most important to advance their long-term economic and

political well-being. For example, Canada wants and needs greater investment from China, but debates over 5G and Huawei investment have stood in the way. Indeed, the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA) makes it difficult for America's partner countries to pursue free trade discussions with non-market countries, i.e., China. More recently, the U.K. was presented with an American trade deal in which they were told it is either "us or China."

On the other hand, less powerful countries can gain leverage by playing off one power against another. However, from Washington's perspective, such gaming is akin to defection. The implication is that even a hint of co-operation with China or Russia will create an imbalance in gains to the detriment of the U.S. From this viewpoint, as allies are increasingly inclined to pursue their own agendas, the U.S. forgoes forming durable and effective alliances. This means the fight against allied defection is critical to the maintenance of American leadership.

Lessons from Intervention – Post-9/11

In the contemporary international grey-zone conflict environment, there are a myriad of coercive and soft tools and tactics with which America has pursued a competitive edge to challenge adversaries and discipline allies. Much of this jockeying for position has occurred against the backdrop of weak and fragile states as the main arena for competition.

Afghanistan is the benchmark against which America's security-first agenda can be judged. America's primary security objective in Afghanistan did not change much under George Bush, Barack Obama or Donald Trump. But while that strategy might have been good for the U.S., it proved to be a fatal flaw for America's NATO allies, who became increasingly frustrated with policy incoherence. Each ally had a different understanding of the resources and capabilities necessary for Afghanistan's stability and development.

As a result, Afghanistan remains a country trapped in fragility and is likely to remain among the worst performers in the foreseeable future. The Taliban has control across much of the country and is powerful enough that President Ashraf Ghani has agreed to negotiate with its leaders. Ghani's government is unlikely to survive without U.S. support.

Despite the injection of billions of dollars, Afghanistan was performing at a better level in 2002 than it is today. While the situation improved immediately after the 2001 intervention, it quickly deteriorated a few years later, such that the country was more fragile by the time Canadian troops left in 2014. Widespread mistrust grew among Afghan civilians and many projects collapsed after foreign troops left an area. Accusations of war crimes committed by all sides remain unanswered.

A scathing assessment by the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction (SIGAR) detailed the trillions of U.S. dollars squandered on fixing Afghanistan. Tackling terrorism in Afghanistan may have been the right thing to do two decades ago. But today, Afghanistan is worse off than before U.S. intervention. Like so many other fragile states which the West was supposed to be helping, the country is now a vector for the transmission of COVID-19.

In examining the conflict in Syria, we see how America's pursuit of maximum relative gains through hybrid warfare operations against adversaries weakened Syrian government forces and diluted the regional influence of Russia and Iran. However, in the long term, the increased intensity of operations further destabilized the political environment and provided a ripe environment for the emergence and mobilization of various extremist groups. Consider that in the early years of the intervention, a coalition of countries provided significant numbers of ground troops and air support for the selected rebel groups, with the U.S. investing the most war materiel and personnel.

The coalition of 23 countries contributed some 9,000 troops. In 2017, the Pentagon revealed that nearly a quarter of all coalition troops, or 2,000 American troops, were on the ground in Syria. This is on top of undisclosed personnel involved in covert and targeted operations. Thus American deployment was nearly 2.5 times higher than the second largest contributor – the U.K., with approximately 850 personnel deployed.

The involvement of the U.S. in Syria becomes even more disproportionate relative to all other coalition partners when examining air operations. As of June 2016, the U.S. engaged in 2,967 air operations, compared to 182 strikes by all other members combined. Since then, the disparity between U.S. and coalition allies' involvement continued to increase. By June 2017, the U.S. had conducted 20 times more air operations in Syria than all other allies combined.

In February 2016, U.S. allies like Canada largely withdrew their tactical and material support. For example, Canada conducted air strikes in Syria and Iraq until Feb. 15, 2016 and Dutch aircraft withdrew from the operations on June 28, 2016. However, with the successful efforts of Russia and Iran to keep the Assad regime in power, the U.S. under the Obama administration was convinced it could not follow its allies. From this perspective, withdrawal meant relinquishing power and influence to its adversaries.

In comparison to Syria, U.S contributions during the first Gulf War were even more disproportionate relative to coalition allies in terms of personnel and materiel. However, the conflict has often been characterized as a genuine multilateral effort. Thus, we can determine that U.S. to allied troops ratios do not matter independently of foreign policy posture nor do they determine the latter. What higher U.S to allied troop ratios can do is help deliver on pre-existing foreign policy directives, such as the Wolfowitz Doctrine, and strategies like genuine multilateralism, competitive multilateralism, or unilateralism.

In Ukraine, efforts by the U.S., EU and Canada to support Kyiv with weapons and training have increased Ukraine's military capacity to counter Russia, although such efforts proved futile in defeating the separatists or preventing Russia's continued intervention.

Kyiv migrated from a vassal status in Moscow's political camp under Viktor Yanukovych, to being subordinate and dependent to another political bloc. This change has not moved the conflict any closer to resolution. It is even more resistant to peaceful settlement.

Indeed, American aid provided in the form of arms and training to the Ukrainian National Guard translated into support for right-wing militias such as the Azov battalion. This has not only galvanized the Russian population's support for Moscow's actions to rescue compatriots, it has further eroded Ukraine's internal cohesion across ethnic lines. Moreover, U.S. support for Ukraine has strengthened Russia's low-intensity hybrid operations and undermined Ukraine's sovereign capacity to resolve its own internal issues.

This obsession with relative gains has spilled over to targeting allies, not just Russia. For example, starting in January 2018 competitive behaviour by the U.S. against the EU escalated over Ukraine as leaders in Washington saw an opportunity to further tie Kyiv to American interests. With the approval of the Nord Stream pipeline construction from Russia to Western Europe, EU nations' relations with Russia entered a phase of détente.

The U.S. concluded that the warming of European-Russian relations meant that Moscow could use this as an opportunity to put further political and economic pressure on Ukraine. Moreover, European aid to Ukraine was cut in half between 2017 and 2018. Washington saw the Europeans' relative disengagement as a chance to increase its own political, economic and war material aid to further solidify Kyiv's dependence on Washington at its allies' expense.

At the same time, Washington's leadership perceived the détente between EU nations and Moscow as a signal that its European allies were attempting to profit from co-operation with U.S. adversaries. Washington believed that on one hand, the EU would continue to benefit from the military-political alliance with the U.S. On the other hand, through the renewed energy co-operation with Russia over the construction of the Nord Stream II pipeline, the EU would also be able to obtain exclusive economic benefits.

In response, the U.S. imposed unilateral sanctions through the 2020 *National Defense Authorization Act* (NDAA) on European companies that have a role in the construction of the Nord Stream II pipeline. From Washington's perspective, this action was necessary to discipline allies as well as undermine adversaries like Russia. However, it should be clearly understood that such measures will be coupled with long-term consequences. As noted by American experts, the act is futile in stopping the pipeline's completion. The greater concern is that Washington's diplomatic relations with major European allies will bear the costs.

Whether it is Afghanistan, Syria or Iraq, the U.S. finds itself increasingly facing asymmetric, but capable adversaries without the support of its closest European allies. For example, Iran's involvement in Syria following the re-imposition of U.S. sanctions increased significantly. This escalation led to the exchange of fire between Israeli and Iranian forces on May 10, 2018. The situation became even more complex as Iranian forces and Tehran-backed non-state groups increased their presence and control in Iraq.

The U.S.'s assassination of Iranian Gen. Qasem Soleimani was meant to weaken Tehran's tactical capabilities. It also was intended to create a political-economic rift between Iran and America's European allies. Unfortunately, based on statements from U.S. President Donald Trump, we now know that in targeting Soleimani the U.S. was primarily interested in saving American lives. The

U.S. was obligated to inform its allies that their soldiers' lives would be at risk as a result of the assassination, but failed to do so.

In another unilateral act on May 8, 2018, the U.S. withdrew from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) and Washington imposed sanctions on all companies which continued to operate in, or in collaboration with, Iran. European allies who wanted to keep the deal condemned this shift. Alongside Washington's geopolitical adversaries like Russia and China, the U.K., France and Germany continued their commitment to the deal. In May 2018, the European Commission declared the sanctions imposed by the U.S. against Iran as illegal in Europe and told European companies they do not need to comply with their provisions.

From Washington's position, such defection by allies is unacceptable. Washington has found it increasingly necessary to yank their chain. Following Soleimani's assassination, for example, European nations had to pick sides. At least partially the U.S. was able to compel allies such as the U.K. and Germany to pledge their allegiance to the U.S. and sever some of the good will established vis-à-vis Tehran.

But that allegiance has proved to be short-lived. With escalation between Iran and the U.S. underway, lines have been drawn in ways that America's allies most likely did not anticipate in agreeing to join a training mission in Iraq. The allied presence in Iraq, for example, was intended to train and equip the Iraq and Kurdish security forces to withstand the resurgence of the Islamic State. But Soleimani's killing quadrupled the numbers of enemies America's allies now face. The U.S. is not only in conflict with Iran, but its proxies operating in neighbouring states, as well as ISIS and various militias within Iraq. Insurgents continue to attack allied bases. Most allies have now withdrawn completely from Iraq.

Security in a Post-Covid-19 World

Trust among close allies is eroding and in circumstances that necessitate co-operation, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, the first instinct among potential partners has been mutual suspicion, skepticism and withdrawal. Supporters of America's security-first doctrine, and by implication those preoccupied with relative gains, should now see the negative side effects of this world view in times of a global health crisis. It is not clear they do.

Indeed, even at the height of the pandemic, the pursuit of relative gains is the first instinct of policy-makers in Washington. For this group, the COVID-19 pandemic is seen mostly as a distraction from their foreign policy priorities. Secretary of State Michael Pompeo continues with his daily briefings in support of sanctions and regime change in Venezuela and Iran. Blame for the pandemic is continually and forcefully assigned to China. The G7 ministers' meeting in March could not draft a consensus statement on responding to the pandemic because Pompeo insisted on calling COVID-19 the Wuhan virus.

More recently, however, the COVID crisis transformed from a distraction to an opportunity for undermining geopolitical adversaries. Thus, some predict that the current crisis will be an accelerant for pre-COVID geopolitical dynamics. First, the crisis sheds light on some of the weaknesses in the bonds of traditional allies like Canada and the U.S. These are rooted in the relative gains preoccupation discussed earlier. Second, the crisis escalated the information war between the U.S. and China and accelerated the geopolitical power shifts that began prior to the appearance of the virus.

For example, the U.S. contemplated a ban on the export of face masks to Canada through wartime legal provisions. In another case, the U.S. considered stationing troops on the Canada-U.S. border to guarantee the security of its northern border from foreign influence. This has been a common refrain from the U.S. since 9/11. Former senator Hillary Clinton once claimed that Canada was the main source for terrorists coming into the U.S. In 2016, American senators expressed concern over embedded terrorists among Syrian refugees entering the U.S. via Canada. Both of these statements helped erode bilateral goodwill between Ottawa and Washington. The suggestion that Canada and the U.S. still have a special relationship seems quaint if not naïve.

America's unilateralism in pursuit of relative gains may at first glance resemble a logical response to remedy its own domestic crises. However, history has shown that only through genuine multilateralism and co-operation can global crises be managed. Essentially, the COVID-19 pandemic is the start of a major shift in global priorities in which America could play a pivotal role if it balances its security-first agenda with effective diplomacy. This shift will be driven partly by the recognition that confrontation with allies is counterproductive and partly by the need to move resources from defence and security to health and societal well-being.

As states are forced to prioritize their domestic economies, a softening if not rejection of the U.S.'s security-first agenda will likely occur. That shift will partly be a function of the extent to which COVID-19 damages America's social fabric and undermines the legitimacy of the current administration in the lead-up to the election this November. It will also depend on whether China rebuffs U.S. sanction efforts and whether it successfully re-asserts its economic and political influence to build trust and support institutions to manage the pandemic and rebuild the global economy.

The wild cards in this mix are U.S. allies who will come out of this pandemic relatively intact, economically and politically, including much of northern Europe. It is not clear how much more U.S. exceptionalism, at their expense, they can tolerate. Increasingly agitated by U.S. bullying, their actions over the next six months will determine whether a return to status quo ante is likely.

For Canada, there is a reckoning of sorts. First, returning to status quo ante is problematic. A world order in which Canada's main trading partner believes it cannot be disciplined for acting outside the rule of law is a world in which Canada cannot survive. As a trading nation, Canada depends on a predictable, rules-based system. Far from being the indispensable nation, the United States in the Trump era has become a country that is both unpredictable and unreliable.

Internationally, great powers like Russia and China may become relative beneficiaries from the crisis by exploiting the lack of cohesion and erratic foreign policy among Western allies. For example, Russia's medical support mission in Italy during COVID-19 in March 2020 was used to solidify Moscow's bilateral relations with Italy and gain political influence in Europe. This was undertaken while Washington and other European nations were preoccupied with their own crises. Concurrently, China has gained an opportunity to strengthen its relative power and reputation in Africa and Eastern Europe by providing medical materiel and expertise in dealing with the virus. The likely result is increased friction among great powers as weak and fragile states once again become their battleground.

A key question is whether the security-first agenda, with its various associated costs, is an effective ethos to engage both allies and adversaries during the current health crisis and future security environment. We believe there has to be a balance between addressing security concerns and the maintenance of robust and impartial oversight as well as equal investments in diplomacy and development assistance. Such a balance will increase decision-makers' capacity to see more clearly the circumstances in which the costs of security-first can be absorbed for the greater good and other instances where genuine multilateralism yields the most benefit.

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