



**CANADIAN GLOBAL AFFAIRS INSTITUTE**  
**INSTITUT CANADIEN DES AFFAIRES MONDIALES**

# **The United States: Its Multilateral Challenges and China's Threat**

by Robert Hage  
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# POLICY PERSPECTIVE

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## **THE UNITED STATES: ITS MULTILATERAL CHALLENGES AND CHINA'S THREAT**

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**F**rom its inception, the United States has been unlike other democracies. While it is a country of immigration and is for many, to use former president Ronald Reagan's biblical turn of phrase, a "shining city on a hill", it has had a lingering suspicion of foreigners and foreign interests. As the leader of the liberal international order since the Second World War, it has practised what might be called intermittent multilateralism.

However, there are signs America's allies are growing weary of the U.S. approach to world affairs. In May, German Chancellor Angela Merkel declined President Donald Trump's invitation to an enlarged G7 meeting in June which would transition the United States "back to greatness". With the U.S. election four months away, it is likely there will be no G7 meeting this year at a time when Western democracies should be co-operating, not bickering.

The pandemic crisis has brought home more than ever that the West faces a new, competing threat – authoritarian China. In the words of its president, Xi Jinping, China has a vision of "guiding international society toward a more just and rational world order". It is time for Western democracies to establish their own vision for the future – one that could see the North Atlantic community establishing the regime of political and economic co-operation that Lester Pearson envisaged in 1948 as a means of challenging communism. The new challenge is no longer the USSR but China.

## **George Washington Started it All**

George Washington himself set the stage for U.S. neutrality when he cautioned against the influence of foreign powers, advising the United States in his farewell address "to steer clear of permanent Alliances".

U.S. presidents and political leaders over the years have followed this advice, advancing multilateral relations only to see their successors set aside their initiatives. Trump was not the first president to cut U.S. funding to the World Health Organization (WHO). Reagan did the same thing in the 1980s, targeting the WHO for undermining U.S. corporate interests in a dispute that began in 1981 over the use of baby formula.

The opening sentences of the Declaration of Independence are well known: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal ..." Less well remembered are the 27 Grievances against King George that follow.

For Canadians, one of those Grievances refers to abolishing English laws in a "neighbouring Province" and enlarging its boundaries. It relates to the British Parliament's passage of the *Quebec Act* in 1774, which gave extensive religious rights to Quebec's French-speaking Catholic population. The act also extended Quebec's territory into what is now the American Midwest, which the Declaration's authors saw as an attempt to impede America's westward expansion.



This concern was made even clearer by the final Grievance that the King “has endeavoured to bring on the inhabitants of our frontiers, the merciless Indian Savages, whose known rule of warfare, is an undistinguished destruction of all ages, sexes and conditions”.

The subsequent Constitution of the United States opened the door to expansion, stating that “nothing in this Constitution shall be so construed as to Prejudice any (territorial) Claims of the United States.” American expansion was based on purchase, occupation, warfare and negotiation with those who claimed the territory: Spain, France, Mexico, Great Britain and Russia, not to mention the native inhabitants.

The United States’ western expansion was given the grand name of manifest destiny. For its advocates, it meant that God had ordained the U.S. “to expand its dominion and spread democracy and capitalism across the entire North American continent”.

Former president James Monroe gave tangible expression to this concept in his 1823 address to Congress (now called the Monroe Doctrine). He stated that “Any attempt by a European power to exert its influence in the Western Hemisphere would, from then on, be seen by the United States as a threat to its security.” This also served as a warning not to interfere in the United States’ own westward expansion.

## **President Woodrow Wilson (Temporarily) Changed the Direction**

As the U.S. grew in power, its relations with foreign states grew more ambiguous. During the First World War, then-president Woodrow Wilson campaigned on the slogan “he kept us out of the war”. But as is often the case with leaders, he changed his mind following German attacks on U.S. merchant ships. U.S. troops fought in the last months of 1917 until the war ended in November 1918, securing the Allied victory.

At war’s end, Wilson set out his Fourteen Points on achieving a lasting peace not only in Europe but worldwide. He included a call for a League of Nations to resolve nations’ disputes, laying the basis for a much more engaged American diplomacy.

Unfortunately, he was not the first or last American president to face Washington’s warnings to avoid foreign engagements. Senator Henry Cabot Lodge, the powerful chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, believed the League would undermine U.S. sovereignty and led the charge with isolationist Republicans to reject it. Wilson received the 1919 Nobel Peace Prize for his efforts, but his health deteriorated and he died five years later a shattered man.

While American foreign policies have tended to isolationism and mistrust of foreign engagements, the U.S. has produced outstanding leaders at just the right time: “Cometh the hour, cometh the man.” Franklin Roosevelt, a seven-year member of Wilson’s administration, was imbued with the Wilsonian belief that economic co-operation, especially free trade, promoted not only prosperity but peace.



## **Franklin Roosevelt was a Wilsonian**

Roosevelt became president in 1932 and led the U.S. from isolationism to active participation with the Allies in the Second World War following Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941. Beyond the American military contribution to the war, Roosevelt's Wilsonian outlook led to the 1944 Bretton Woods Conference where 44 allied nations created the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the International Fund for Reconstruction and Development (the World Bank).

Roosevelt coined the words "United Nations" but did not live to see the U.S. lead the UN's creation in October 1945. The trade element of the Anglo-American postwar plan took more time, but in 1947 nations agreed to create the International Trade Organization, cut tariffs and establish interim trade rules under the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT). However, the Republican Senate again rejected an international body, maintaining the ITO would intrude too much in America's internal economic affairs. Nations functioned under the interim GATT rules until the WTO was created in 1994.

## **The United States Leads the World's New Order**

This continuation of Wilson's principles under Roosevelt and his successors led to what became known as the liberal international order. It worked under U.S. leadership to strengthen democratic governments, open markets and multilateral institutions and promote human rights (with Eleanor Roosevelt as a force behind the UN's Declaration of Human Rights). There was also a security component with the founding of NATO as a Western bulwark against further Soviet intrusion in Europe.

Western democracies, especially war-torn Europe and Japan, readily accepted U.S. leadership, although as time went on some of the same old forces within the U.S. came into play: national sovereignty, manifest destiny and even isolationism. U.S. allies tolerated much of this under the rubric of American exceptionalism as the price to pay for American political, economic and military leadership.

## **The Challenge: Multilateralism or National Interest**

Examples are rife of America's multilateral challenges. As a permanent member of the UN Security Council since 1946, the U.S. has the right to name a judge to the International Court of Justice. At the same time, the U.S. has refused to accept the Court's overall authority. When Nicaragua successfully brought a case against the U.S. in 1984 for its backing of invading forces to overthrow the government and for mining its harbours, the U.S. refused to participate and used its position on the Security Council to deny Nicaragua court-ordered compensation.

The U.S., as a major military and merchant maritime power with extensive coastal resources, was an early advocate of the 1973 Third UN Conference on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). All



participating states agreed to strive for consensus in drafting a new LOS convention and to refrain from requesting a vote until all possibilities in achieving consensus had been exhausted. Reagan had other ideas after his 1980 election and demanded changes to favour private interests in the convention's provisions on seabed mining in an area the General Assembly had named "the common heritage of mankind". There was no consensus to the American proposal and the U.S. literally walked out of the conference.

Developing and Soviet-bloc countries immediately ratified the convention, but developed countries held back in the absence of American participation. In 1994 under UN auspices, the seabed mining provisions were successfully amended to encourage private development under the internationally agreed-upon regime. The UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) is one of the UN's most widely agreed-upon treaties. It has been ratified by 167 states; the U.S. is not one of them.

Canadian diplomats have chaired two international conferences, one in 1997 to establish the Anti-Personnel Mine Ban Convention (the Ottawa Treaty) and the other in 1998 to create the International Criminal Court (ICC). In both cases, they worked hard to find ways to make the treaties acceptable to the U.S. The U.S. did not sign the mine ban convention, but in 2014 then-president Barack Obama put a ban on the U.S. military's use of mines except for those used for South Korea's defence. This year, Trump reversed this policy.

Former president Bill Clinton signed the ICC statute but his successor, George Bush, said the U.S. would not ratify it. In 2019, U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said the U.S. would prohibit any ICC staff member from visiting the U.S. to investigate allegations of human rights violations by U.S. troops in Afghanistan. In June this year, Trump went a step further by issuing an executive order blocking the financial assets of court personnel conducting investigations and also barring their immediate relatives from entering the U.S.

Climate change negotiations have been another target. The U.S. played a very active role in ensuring the 2015 Paris Climate Change Conference was a success and joined more than 190 countries in adopting the Paris Agreement. In September 2016, Obama announced that the U.S. and China had formally deposited their instruments of acceptance with the UN in order to speed up the agreement's early entry into force. In 2017, Trump said the U.S. would withdraw from the agreement.

The Trump administration has not stopped at climate change and has now taken on outer space, but this time with bipartisan backing. U.S. shifts on multilateral questions often relate to which party has the presidency or a majority in the Senate or House of Representatives. But every so often, all are in agreement and outer space is a good example. While the U.S. is a party to the 1967 Outer Space Treaty which prohibits the "national appropriation" of the moon and other celestial bodies, it is alone in maintaining that "commercial space mining does not constitute national appropriation."

Prior to the end of his presidency, Obama signed the *Commercial Space Act* which provides that a U.S. citizen engaged in commercial recovery of outer space resources is entitled to "possess, own



or transport that resource”. This year, Trump issued an executive order instructing the State Department to seek the support of other states for the U.S.’s position. These will be bilateral, not multilateral, treaties with the U.S. dictating the terms.

## **The End of American Exceptionalism?**

It seems, however, both the U.S. and its allies are growing tired of American exceptionalism. Obama had already questioned this exceptionalism when he stated the U.S. can no longer be “the world’s policeman”. He nevertheless called the U.S. “an indispensable nation”. Trump sees the U.S. as “losing to other countries”, preferring an “America First” approach based on national interest and rejection of multilateralism. While Western states have sometimes bridled at the U.S.’s struggle with multilateralism, they have recognized America’s “indispensable” role. The problem is there is another powerful but autocratic nation that wants to replace the U.S.

Xi told the Communist Party’s National Congress that the Chinese model has opened “a new trail for other developing countries to achieve modernization”. This offers “Chinese wisdom and a Chinese approach to solving the problems facing mankind ... Socialism with Chinese characteristics is flying high and proud for all to see.” If Trump is no longer interested in maintaining the liberal international order captained by the U.S., Xi told the UN General Assembly that “China will continue to uphold the international order and system ... underpinned by the purposes and principles of the UN Charter.”

## **A Fight for the Future**

If the U.S. is to continue to be an indispensable nation and offer the world democracy instead of Chinese autocracy, it will need allies willing to work with it. Yet the gulf between the U.S. and other Western countries, particularly those in the European Union, is widening. America’s pick-and-choose approach to multilateralism is becoming less and less tenable and tolerable.

China cannot be quelled in its world vision by a divided West and it is time in the hoped-for post-Trump world for North America and Western Europe to collaborate on a new transatlantic agreement embracing economic, political and people-to-people co-operation in what can be the world’s largest economic area with half the world’s GDP. That world was envisaged in 1948 by then-External Affairs minister Pearson in negotiating the North Atlantic Treaty which brought about NATO. While NATO was to be a military and defence alliance, Pearson and his colleagues had an additional thought. What if NATO could go beyond collective security to strengthen its members’ free institutions and encourage economic collaboration among any or all of NATO’s members? Unfortunately, a lack of consensus within NATO kept Article 2 from reaching its goal but it remains in the text as an aspiration and is known as “the Canadian article”.

Former U.S. trade representative Carla Hills said an economic agreement between NAFTA and the EU “would bring badly needed regulatory coherence to more than half of the world’s trade”.



Such an agreement would also establish a vital standard-setting mechanism of global scope; for example, furnishing the next telecommunications level after 5G or leading the development of artificial intelligence – areas where China is already in the forefront.

This will require leaders on both sides of the Atlantic who are prepared to build on the years of shared values, interests and security that Europe and North America have together enjoyed. They will see they cannot leave China alone with its worldwide agenda and that, by engaging democratic states to create the world's largest co-operative bloc, they will enhance the future well-being of all their citizens.

## ► About the Author

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**Robert Hage** is a Fellow at the Canadian Global Affairs Institute, was a Canadian diplomat with the Department of Global Affairs for 38 years and served as Canada's Ambassador to Hungary and Slovenia, as Director General for Europe and Director General for Legal Affairs. He also served in Canada's embassies in Washington, Lagos and Paris, as Deputy Head of the Canadian Mission to the European Union in Brussels and, in early 2012, acting Head of Mission at the Canadian Embassy in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia.

He was also Director of four divisions including International Financial and Investment Affairs and relations with the European Union; Principal Counsel for the Canada-USA Free Trade Agreement; Counsel on the Environmental Side Agreement to NAFTA and a representative for Canada at the United Nations Conference on the Law of the Sea. He has written and commented on a range of subjects including West Coast energy issues, maritime boundaries and Canada-EU relations. Mr. Hage formerly taught a course on Modern Diplomacy at the University of Ottawa's graduate school.

## ► **Canadian Global Affairs Institute**

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