



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

# **U.S. Defence Policy: A Bird's Eye View**

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# CONFERENCE REPORT

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### ***Opening Remarks***

- Coming up on 100 days of the administration, it is good to take a strategic, high level view of U.S. defence of the new administration which has hit the ground running to implement changes across the government.
- The September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks on the United States transformed the U.S.'s comprehension of its own security and defence prior to and after the tragedy, leading the country to entangle itself in protracted conflicts (e.g., Iraq, Afghanistan, ISIS).
- Experiences with protracted wars has made the U.S. tired and contribute to shifting attention away from material foreign engagements and focusing on the enormous domestic challenges it currently faces.
- The U.S. is now looking beyond current wars; pulling out of Afghanistan on 9/11 is very symbolically important. There is a continued strategic shift towards greater attention on competition with Russia and China.
- The U.S. knows what it wants in terms of a liberal international order, but it is unclear how it gets there.

***QUESTION:*** *How long has this strategic shift towards great power competition been underway?*

- The strategic shift towards great power competition predates Trump with a few noteworthy events.
  - By 2011, the U.S. was largely out of Iraq, and ISIS was not yet as significant of a concern as it would become.
  - The U.S. was starting its “pivot” to Asia amid the withdraw from Iraq in response to, amongst other things: increased Chinese aggression (particularly in the South China Sea), and significant investment in the next generation of warfare technology and future defining innovations, including artificial intelligence and quantum computing.



- Russia's actions signaling its rise as an adversarial and revisionist actor. Its annexation of Crimea and ongoing actions throughout Europe and abroad show that this is unlikely to end soon.

**QUESTION:** *Where amidst the shift are allies in these strategic calculation (vis-à-vis where does Canada fit in as well)?*

- One of the biggest changes is that the Biden administration is much more favourable to international organizations and alliances, collective defence in particular, as it seeks to rebuild its relationship with NATO and other organizations.
- It is believed that the relationship with NATO is not as damaged as originally feared, but some rebuilding is still needed, keeping in mind the integration of “newer” members of the alliance and their concerns related to Eastern, Mediterranean, and Southern members.
- Although Canada is a quiet member of NATO, Canada is viewed as incredibly important as one of the two North American members that consistently contributes when needed.
- Overall, Biden has a history of being very pro-international institutions, dating back to his time in Congress.

**QUESTION:** *How do you characterize the United States' ability to think internationally with mind to the deep domestic issues right now.*

- This is to be determined. Since the start of Biden's administration almost 100 days ago the focus has been on the major domestic concerns including controlling the spread of COVID-19, addressing domestic vaccine concerns, economic precarity due to the pandemic, and the deep political and ideological fissures in the country.
- Biden announced billions for economic and domestic infrastructure, which is defined to include childcare, health care, and other non-traditional notions of infrastructure.
  - This amounts to a \$1.7 trillion package, with a \$2 trillion package expected later in the summer. Heavy opposition from conservatives is expected as they return to opposition tactics.
- This will leave much of the international work to career professionals to repair the relationships and human infrastructure that was decimated during the Trump administration.



- There has been an increased effort and funding from the Biden administration to the U.S. State Department for this purpose.
- The Biden administration is likely to focus on domestic issues while public perceptions of national security are likely to change due to the COVID-19 pandemic where millions have died despite the \$750 billion investment in the military.

**QUESTION:** *Considering ongoing populist rhetoric that undermines the role of professionals and experts, where do you think the state is in terms of relationships and experts?*

- This relationship affects everything. Biden faces a deeply divided country and a Republican party where former President Donald Trump still has a strong grip, which supports continued undermining of this relationship.

**QUESTION:** *Are the above changes being recognized in the government and traditional political establishment? Will there be rebalancing from the Democratic or Republican parties based on this climate?*

- Yes, but Biden administration has not changed the budget too much compared to previous administration. However, this is the norm for the first budget of an administration, and we can expect larger opposition later this year.
- There will be a steady change in approach by the administration, but right now there is a need to refill the ranks of non-military U.S. foreign policy institutions, which lost significant personnel during the Trump administration.

**QUESTION:** *Is the U.S. at a point where it begins to view the use of force more apprehensively?*

- Yes, it has changed since 9/11 and continues to change. There is more apprehension/opposition to the use of force than ever.
- For many reasons, Afghanistan is the top. At best, the U.S. presence in Afghanistan can be considered a stalemate. However, the U.S. intervention in Afghanistan will likely be viewed in much worse light in the years to come.
- This apprehension to the use of force will also affect peacekeeping and peace enforcements, there is little to no nuance in how the use of force in this capacity versus that of traditional conflicts are viewed.



- The United States Special Operations Command (USSOCOM) is the exception and will remain very active as terrorism is not going anywhere.
  - USSOCOM has traditionally engaged in hybrid and unconventional warfare throughout the Cold War, although the United States is still not good at this as it includes non-military domains.
- Possible war with Russia and/or China is being realistically thought about and prepared for, which doesn't reduce military budgets.
- New tech-enabled revolution in military affairs is producing new security dilemmas across a host of areas including artificial intelligence, quantum computing, cyber, and more.
- The technology of today means you don't need to use war to influence politics, which is a difficult thing to combat and is what motivates that Biden administration's reassigning values to the liberal international order.
- Two decades of unsuccessful wars, with a pandemic at home and a very divided American society, Biden is unlikely to emphasize or spent much political capital on material support for endeavours abroad.
- There will be a great emphasis on diplomatic channels and rhetoric will couple will a less active United States in other endeavours while it funnels increased funding to the State Department.

**QUESTION:** *What will shape the U.S.'s relationship with allies going forward? Will there be a return to normal prior to Trump? Or will there be more Trump?*

- Difficult to tell what will happen four years from now, but there will be a focus on home. It will not be "America First," but the massive domestic problems that were exacerbated by the pandemic will be the focus.
- Internationally the United States will look to build coalitions and work in partnerships, but the U.S. is likely reluctant to take on a pre-Trump leadership role due to domestic concerns.
- As a result of this domestic focus of the U.S., burden sharing will remain a big concern because the United States is unable to always provide material support.
- There is no going back to normal (like post-COVID), post-Trump we will have a new normal.



*DISCLAIMER: This report was funded by a grant from the United States Department of State. The opinions, findings and conclusions stated herein are those of the speakers and do not necessarily reflect those of the United States Department of State.*

## ▶ **About the Author**

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***Alexander Rudolph** is a PhD student in the Department of Political Science at Carleton University, working under the supervision of Dr. Elinor Sloan. Alex's research investigates the interaction between states, society, and cyberspace, with a focus on cyber conflict, cyber statecraft, the strategic thought of cyberspace, and Canadian cyber defense and cybersecurity. His doctoral research explores a structuration analysis and explanation of cyber conflict and warfare and how this informs the development of a country's strategic doctrine of cyberspace and its use in military and intelligence operations.*



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