

OPINION

Friend or faux? Managing the end of the ‘special relationship’

The policy establishment finds itself desperately playing catch-up to the Trump agenda, coming to terms with the fact the U.S. is now in a position to inflict significant harm on the Canadian economy.

David Carment



Opinion

Prime Minister Justin Trudeau’s decision to resign as leader of the Liberal Party in response to growing political and public pressure comes at a crucial time for Canada, both domestically and internationally. United States President Donald Trump’s looming tariffs have forced Trudeau’s government to regroup and select a leader to counter the Conservatives in the next election, and push back against Trump’s protectionist trade agenda.

These dynamics set the stage for intensified competition in the general election between two frontrunners with government experience: former finance—and foreign—minister Chrystia Freeland, and Conservative Party Leader Pierre Poilievre.

Just a few weeks ago, Poilievre was guaranteed a win. Today,

the gap is closing. People are now questioning whether Poilievre is just an empty suit bereft of ideas, and Freeland is yesterday’s news with a checkered record. Are these fair comparisons?

Poilievre has stated that a response to Trump’s tariffs would require working with “American economic allies on the ground” to put pressure on Washington, D.C., to back down. Poilievre is opposed to retaliatory tariffs that would affect Canada’s petroleum industry, arguing that this country should build more refineries and bypass the U.S. market. To the Conservative leader’s thinking, Trump would then be compelled to buy oil from countries such as Venezuela and Iran.

When he does dip a toe into broader foreign policy, it is hawkish. Back in October, Poilievre said that an Israeli strike on Iran’s nuclear facilities would be—in his words—“a gift by the Jewish state to humanity,” a position more extreme than that held by many members of the U.S. Congress.

Like the new president in the White House, Poilievre has consistently opposed climate change policies, such as the carbon tax, and, like Trump, he is enthusiastic about fossil fuel exports. He has been critical of work related to corporate interests that is not conducive to the exploitation of energy and real estate, while the core issues are the decline of Canadian innovation and competitiveness including investments in Tier 1 manufacturing and intellectual property research—where the country is lagging.

Poilievre’s populist approach to small government and divisiveness dates back to his time serving under then-Conservative prime minister Stephen Harper. Harper reduced Canada’s pres-

ence in multilateral fora while extolling the virtues of becoming a “warrior nation.”

As foreign minister from 2017 to 2019, Freeland did not play any significant role at the United Nations. Nor did she provide guidance on how Canada could recast its place in the world when it was most desperately needed. In the years since she left the post, Canada failed to secure free trade agreements with both China and India, while also losing out on a seat on the UN Security Council.

Today, Canada’s foreign policy positions and policies have become mirror images of the U.S. State Department, whether these pertain to regime change in Venezuela, Myanmar, Syria, and Iran; sanctioning geopolitical rivals Russia and China; or, more recently, implementing a common Indo-Pacific strategy. There are, of course, some exceptions, such as Canada’s long-standing opposition to the U.S. embargo on Cuba.

This lack of independent diplomatic engagement comes at a time when America is either withdrawing from or scaling back its contributions to key organizations and global compacts such as the World Health Organization, the Paris Climate Agreement, the UN, and the World Trade Organization.

Today, Canada’s policy establishment finds itself desperately playing catch-up to an ambitious Trump agenda, coming to terms with the fact that its southern neighbour—which Freeland described as the “indispensable nation”—is now in a position to inflict significant harm on the Canadian economy.

As finance minister, Freeland chose a particular strategy post-COVID to more closely align

the Canadian economy with the U.S. through “friendshoring.” At the same time, she was committing Canada to reducing supply chains in support of delinking from China in favour of building “fortress North America.”

Freeland has been openly critical of Trump, which did not help Canada’s cause during the Canada-United States-Mexico Agreement negotiations. Although the trash talk continues to play well domestically, the lack of substance and self-awareness is telling. Canadian perceptions of Trump’s threats of economic coercion as distinctly anti-Canadian overlook their roots in broader U.S. self-interest that has been in play since long before Trump came to power.

For example, within the G7, the U.S. share of wealth over the last 20 years has risen significantly from 33 per cent to more than 55 per cent. The rise in U.S. economic dominance within the G7 contrasts with the group’s overall decline relative to the BRICS nations. At the same time, Canada’s GDP per capita has declined relative to the U.S. Despite promises to leverage immigration for growth, Canada struggles to retain skilled STEM graduates, marking a failure of economic policy.

In a nutshell, there are some obvious and important distinctions between Poilievre and Freeland. But there are also some very significant and uncomfortable similarities. Indeed, the diplomatic approach taken by both individuals is likely to be more of the same in regard to following the U.S. lead on defence and security.

One overlooked question is whether a Canadian prime minister could act as a moderating

voice for a Trump administration that has the potential to become bellicose, divisive, and confrontational. Trump has signalled a mixed message of bringing restraint to U.S. foreign policy by ending its forever wars—a goal former president Joe Biden proved incapable of reaching.

A positive shift from Trump could become an opportunity for Canada to renew its diplomatic mandate, developing a much different foreign policy agenda better matched to the realities of a more polycentric and regional world fatigued by constant wars involving the U.S. and its allies.

On the other hand, there is the close-knit relationship between neo-conservative U.S. elites and think tanks whose opinions on China, Iran, and Russia are unambiguously hostile, and the support and endorsements political leaders like Freeland and Poilievre receive from these groups.

Canada’s next prime minister must take the country towards self-assured and more autonomous statecraft. Unlike Poilievre, whose capacity for responsible statecraft is untested, Freeland has shown a fondness for building coalitions to oppose adversaries, in contrast to engaging in real diplomatic dialogue with those adversaries. Not only does exclusion reflect a zero-sum framing and a pack mentality that rewards ideology and Manichean thinking, it is also inherently risky and destabilizing.

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COMMENT

The slide back towards war

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international peace and security, and justice, are not endangered.”

That means they have promised not to settle their disputes by war, and the African pair—Rwanda and the DRC—also signed the Charter of the African Union, which requires the member states to respect the borders “existing on achievement of independence.”

In other words, they agreed never to change or challenge the old colonial borders, however irrational they may seem in ethnic or historical terms. Otherwise African countries would face generations of interstate wars as

various countries tried to achieve more “convenient” borders.

And amazingly, it has worked, more or less. These rules have for the most part been obeyed for more than two generations. There have been many internal wars but few cross-border wars, and even those rarely result in border changes. Moreover, in the few cases where borders are changed by force, other countries do not recognize the changes as legitimate.

This remarkable turn towards peace and justice—which has seen deaths in the world’s wars fall from a million a month in 1942-45 to tens of thousands a year by 2020—was driven mostly by the fear of nuclear war.

The great powers did not dare fight each other directly because they would be destroyed by nuclear weapons. They also tried to damp down other, lesser wars because they worried about escalation, and most other countries were glad to have an excuse to stop. The period between 1950 and 2020 was probably the most peaceful in the history of civilization.

The new rules made sense in the circumstances, so people behaved accordingly. Indeed, after the Cold War, I could go into the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Moscow and get approximately the same lecture about the need to obey the rules that I would

receive in the State Department in Washington, D.C.

The worry is that the generations turn over, and gradually the old lessons are forgotten. Russian President Vladimir Putin probably knew the rules once, but he doesn’t think they matter any more. Trump has probably never heard of them. They both think you can just grab some territory and get away with it, like you could in the 1600s or the 1800s.

They are wrong. Actions have consequences, and in the current era everything connects. Putin thought he could conquer Ukraine in a week, and next month will mark three years of war. Trump really could seize Greenland in a week, but the blowback from everywhere else would be hugely damaging and long-lasting.

As for Kagame, he really should know better. This is the third time in the past 30 years that he has sent his troops—or Tutsi militants like the current M23 militia—into the DRC to seize the northeast region’s rich mineral resources. Twice, the African Union has come up with enough forces to push him out, and it might yet manage it again.

So it’s not over yet. The erosion of the post-1945 international rules is real and alarming, but so far enough people still remember why we made them in the first place.

Gwynne Dyer’s new book is Intervention Earth: Life-Saving Ideas from the World’s Climate Engineers. Last year’s book, The Shortest History of War, is also still available.

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