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Canada should re-examine U.S. relations, 'pursue its own future' in face of Trump's pandemic response, say foreign policy and trade experts

‘America is putting itself first, which is natural. Why shouldn’t we behave in the same way?’ says Carleton U’s David Carment.



U.S. President Donald Trump has cut funding to the World Health Organization and tried to block the export of public health supplies to Canada as he has grappled with the COVID-19 pandemic. *Photograph courtesy of the White House via Flickr*

NEWS (/NEWS/) | BY [PETER MAZEREEUW \(https://www.hilltimes.com/ht_author/peter-mazereeuw/\)](https://www.hilltimes.com/ht_author/peter-mazereeuw/) | June 1, 2020

Canada should respond to U.S. President Donald Trump’s “America First” policies for the COVID-19 pandemic by becoming more self-reliant, manufacturing more of its own essential supplies, and “recalibrating” its relationship with its southern neighbour, say foreign affairs experts and a parliamentary critic.

“America is putting itself first, which is natural. Why shouldn’t we behave in the same way?” said David Carment, a professor at Carleton University’s Norman Paterson School of International Affairs.

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“A country that believes that the rules of trade or diplomacy can be repeatedly violated is not a country that Canada can rely on or even engage with systematically,” he told *The Hill Times* in an interview last week.

“What the U.S. is demonstrating is that it is no longer working by the rules that Canada has based its trading relationship on with the world. That’s a problem for Canada.”

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Mr. Trump's government has moved aggressively to secure essential supplies for the United States as it has sought to control the COVID-19 pandemic, which has killed nearly 100,000 Americans—roughly the same number as in the next three worst-affected countries combined.

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The Trump administration attempted to block U.S.-based manufacturer 3M from filling a huge order of medical-grade face masks from Ontario this spring, before relenting.

Multiple international media outlets reported in March that the Trump administration had also sought to buy exclusive access for the U.S. to a vaccine for the disease that was being developed in Germany, which the German government confirmed but the vaccine research company later denied.



Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, pictured on May 21, 2020, in Ottawa.
'It is in both of our interests to maintain this extraordinary close relationship', Mr. Trudeau told reporters on April 4, as he was negotiating a deal to allow U.S. manufacturers to send essential supplies to Canada. *The Hill Times photograph by Andrew Meade*

The Trump government also cut U.S. funding to the World Health Organization amid the pandemic, citing concerns with the way the organization had managed the crisis. Mr. Trump has previously said that the virus would disappear “like a miracle,” and speculated that malaria medication or bleach could treat the disease.

Mr. Trump has put U.S. allies and multilateral institutions in his crosshairs in a number of other ways since he was elected in 2016, including starting a trade war with Canada, and putting NATO members under pressure to ramp up their defence spending.

Canada should ‘pursue its own future’: Harris

Instead of pointing fingers, however, Canada’s leaders should figure out why they were relying on the United States for personal protective equipment and other cooperation in the first place, and become more self-reliant, said Prof. Carment.

“Maybe there’s a lesson here that some things are so essential, that you don’t open [them] up to the fragility of [a] supply chain,” he said.



David Carment is a professor at Carleton University's Norman Paterson School of International Affairs, and the editor of its Canadian Foreign Policy Journal. *File photograph*

The government should try to make it easier for Canadian manufacturers to shift their production to essential equipment, like personal protective equipment, in times of crisis in the future, he said.



Canada should ensure its manufacturers can meet the country's essential needs in times of crisis, says NDP foreign affairs critic Jack Harris. *File photograph*

“If you deem these things to be

essential to Canadian security, then there's absolutely no reason why these things shouldn't be internalized,” he said.

NDP MP Jack Harris (St. John's East, N.L.), his party's foreign affairs critic, also said that Canada should beef up its ability to manufacture supplies and equipment that are essential in an emergency, and so did Carlo Dade, the director of the Calgary-based think tank the Canada West Foundation's Trade and Investment Centre.

“Canada has to accept that it has to pursue its own future, based on our ability to carry on our operations as independently as possible,” said Mr. Harris.

Canada should also fund more think tanks and academics focused specifically on Canada-U.S. relations, said Mr. Dade, who argued that policymakers here have been caught off guard by U.S. actions including the imposition of tariffs on Canadian steel and aluminum exports.

“Until we get that capacity I think we are still going to be continually taken by surprise by things that happen in the U.S., and we’ll lack the ability to really do a recalibration of our relationship with the U.S.,” he said.

The Conservative caucus’ critic for Canada-U.S. relations, Colin Carrie (Oshawa, Ont.), referred an interview request to Conservative foreign affairs critic Leona Alleslev (Aurora-Oak Ridges-Richmond Hill, Ont.). Ms. Alleslev’s office said she was not available for an interview.

A spokesperson for the Liberal parliamentary secretary for foreign affairs, Rob Oliphant (Don Valley West, Ont.), also said he was not available for an interview. Liberal MP Michael Levitt (York Centre, Ont.), who chairs the House Foreign Affairs Committee, did not respond to an interview request.

Strike a new ‘Macdonald Commission’: Dade

The “America first” approach to international relations has roots deeper than Mr. Trump himself, and may continue after he leaves office, said Mr. Dade and Prof. Carment.

“The changes in the U.S. are profound. It’s gone from being a defender of the global liberal trade order to attacking it,” said Mr. Dade.

Canada’s big-picture trading relationship with the United States isn’t going anywhere, but the number of issues for which the U.S. can be counted on as a reliable ally has “shrunk dramatically” compared to years past, he said.



The Trump administration has failed to permanently fill many top-level bureaucratic posts, “severely” weakening the expertise used to inform its policy making, said Mr. Dade.

Canada has lost some of its key allies in U.S. politics in recent years, says Carlo Dade, the director of the Canada West Foundation’s Trade and Investment Centre. *Photograph courtesy of the Canada West Foundation*

A new generation of Republican lawmakers is less sympathetic to or informed about the value of Canada to the United States, said Mr. Dade.



Senator Peter Boehm previously served as the senior associate deputy minister of foreign affairs in Global Affairs Canada. *The Hill Times photograph by Sam Garcia*

“The

Republican Party that we thought we knew is no longer there.”

The government should strike a new version of the Macdonald Commission to look at how to “recalibrate” the Canada-U.S. relationship, said Mr. Dade.

The Macdonald Commission, also known as the Royal Commission on the Economic Union and Development Prospects for Canada, was struck by prime minister Pierre Trudeau in 1982 to examine the future economic prospects of Canada. Three years later, it reported a set of recommendations to prime minister Brian Mulroney that included negotiating a free trade agreement with the United States, which the Mulroney government undertook shortly after and completed in 1987.

“The world of the MacDonald Commission, I would argue, has been completely upended” by the new U.S. approach to international relations, said Mr. Dade.

However, Senator Peter Boehm, a former high-ranking official in Global Affairs Canada, said Mr. Trump’s actions are no reason to change the Canada-U.S. relationship.

“I don’t see why we should change our perspective. The U.S. has always been our key partner in international relations. I don’t see that changing. I think bilaterally, we have worked very well together through this pandemic,” said Sen. Boehm, who retired from the public service and was appointed to the Senate in 2018.

Canada and U.S. working ‘below the surface’: Boehm

Mr. Harris argued that the United States has “abdicated” its leadership role on the world stage. He said Canada should find other international partners to work with.

Sen. Boehm said that international bodies including the World Bank and International Monetary Fund serve as a “counterweight” for Canada to its deep relationship with the United States.

“If we are looking at reform of international institutions, if we are looking for a new normal in terms of the conduct of multilateral diplomacy, I would expect Canada to be very engaged in that,” he told *The Hill Times*.

Canadian and American officials have continued to work together during the pandemic, said Sen. Boehm, who pointed to a mutual agreement to close the border to non-essential travel, and then extend that closure, as an example.

“There’s a lot going on below the surface that most people don’t know about. And that means technical discussions, whether it is on transport issues, whether it is on how to cooperate on vaccine research,” he said.

“The relationship with the U.S. is multifaceted, it’s not just at the top.”

Canada will face difficult choices as it navigates a world in which multilateral institutions are no longer supported by the U.S. China has built its own sphere of influence, and some longtime U.S. allies are openly questioning U.S. foreign policy, said Prof. Carment.

“Are we going to be part of that? Are we going to bandwagon with them? Or are we just going to fold back into the American sphere of influence?”

Meanwhile, the president is also being criticized for his lack of leadership on the chaos and crisis gripping the United States and for inciting even more violence into the rising social unrest. Street protests have swept across the United States and in major cities around the world over the death last Monday of George Floyd, a 46-year-old African American man who was killed after a white Minneapolis police officer pressed his knee on his neck. Under banners saying Black Lives Matter, thousands of protesters worldwide have been calling for the end of police brutality and racial bias in the criminal justice system. The four Minneapolis police officers were fired and one was charged with third-degree murder and second-degree manslaughter of Mr. Floyd. Mr. Trump incited more violence when he tweeted last week that “looting leads to shooting” and “THUGS” were “dishonouring the memory of George Floyd.”



Peter Mazereeuw is executive editor at *The Hill Times*. He writes and edits *The Hill Times*' daily subscriber newsletter, Politics This Morning, and hosts and produces its weekly podcast, The Hot Room.

Mazereeuw has covered politics and policy for *The Hill Times* and its sister publications since 2012. See all stories BY PETER MAZEREEUW (https://www.hilltimes.com/ht_author/peter-mazereeuw/)

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