

# ACTIVITY REPORT



30 October to 2 November, 2019

The Student Conference on U.S. Affairs 71: Advancing the National Interest – The Intersection of Domestic Politics and American Foreign Policy, West Point, NY

## Reflections from the Student Conference on U.S. Affairs 71 (SCUSA)

Myles Erickson, University of Manitoba

My time attending SCUSA 71 eliminated many myths I held about the American perspective, providing insight into how young Americans perceive issues on defence and security. Most fascinating was the insight into how Americans perceive themselves and their place in the world. This perspective and self-image is one based on American exceptionalism and the abilities granted to the United States as a global superpower. These values and perspectives are fundamentally different than the Canadian perspective. The "American Perspective", as I perceived it, was based on the ability for the United States to spread its values across the globe, with, at times, little regard for the states it may be assisting. Ally states were suggested to "need" the United States. International organizations such as NATO were presumed to rely on the United States to provide them legitimacy. NORAD, a binational agreement between the U.S. and Canada was not mentioned during the conference. The common American values expressed were liberty, democracy, and the rule of law. These values seemed to come at the cost of the recognition of international law and sovereignty. This perspective permeated throughout many of the policy recommendations presented at the conference. With that said, differing opinions were shared.

While attending SCUSA 71, I sat on the panel on climate change. While discussing the security implications of climate change, the United States government formally opted out of the Paris Climate Accord, a cruel irony indeed. The government's explicit denial of climate change was countered however by an incredibly lively and passionate climate change panel, which argued that the United States needed to implement more progressive policies on the issue. The panel began with a consensus agreement that climate change existed and represented an existential threat to American defence and security. The panel ultimately wrote a recommendation to the United States government, stating a need to take a whole-of-government approach to climate change, tying government spending to the implementation of government regulation – if a private company wishes to win a government contract, it was be required to implement environmental regulations drafted by congress.

I was struck by the acceptance of "big government," with regards to the implementation of environmental regulation. There is a general perception outside of the U.S. that the United States is resistant to government regulation, that the public will reject government attempts to reshape society. However, the panel viewed climate change policy was regarded similarly to defence – in certain departments 'big government' is not only accepted, but expected. Alternatively, it was interesting to note the general acceptance that the markets and the actors which represent them (business owners, shareholders) needed to be taken into account in shaping acceptable policies. This represents the duality of climate change policy. Government needs to act effectively and efficiently, but other sectors of society need to remain comfortable and economically viable for the policies to be effective and accepted by the American public.

SCUSA brought to light several issues in the Canada-US relationship. For one, there requires further integration and interaction between young American and Canadian scholars. Many Americans I spoke to had little idea that Canada was as large as it was, whether in terms of geography, economy, or history. Furthermore, there was little knowledge of the current Canada-US relationship. As previously mentioned, few if any fellow delegates were aware of NORAD and its role in North American defence. As well, many knew next to nothing about Canadian geography, history, or government. Canadians could be better served by raising awareness of Canadian ideas, values, and perspectives to common Americans, as there is a gap in knowledge. This does not go to blame Americans for the gap, the United States has a sphere of influence that Canada is directly in the middle of; Canada is often not mentioned in the American education system. With this said, I found there to be a great desire in learning more about Canada and our perspectives, as climate change needs the action and attention of all actors, not just the United States.

With regards to Canada vis-a-vis American policy on climate change, Canada would best be served working on a binational basis with the United States in shaping a North American approach to climate change. This would align the two states' environmental policies, allowing for a better transition economically, and in the defence realm. This is especially vital with regards to the warming of the Arctic and the security implications this brings forth. As the Arctic becomes more and more a potential region for resource extraction, economic development, and defence and security, Canada should prepare and invest in its Arctic capacities before the United States takes notice. Canada's ability to exert sovereignty in the Arctic relies on being at the forefront of the issue, and it should not wait to be at the back of the line before acting on the issue.

My experience at SCUSA was revelatory in understanding the true American perspective. Many young American scholars maintain a nuanced and complex view of their own country, and are able to look past the polarized rhetoric in their country to see the issues present in North American and beyond. Canadians would be best served interacting more with Americans, as there exists a gap in knowledge about Canada. A gap exists for Canadians too however, as the image of the United States too often is one of stereotypes and judgment. Too often Canadians witness the rush of the 24 hour news cycle and assume it reflects the opinions and perspectives of the common American. My time at SCUSA complicated this image, and suggested that future US-Canada relations are far more positive than we imagine them to be.