

MAY 29, 2020

## Democracy, Donald Trump, and the Canada-US Security Environment

Wilfrid Greaves, Ph.D.  
Network Coordinator

In this research note, I evaluate the impact of the Trump presidency on Canada-US relations within the framework of a pluralistic security community (PSC). While the bilateral relationship has been turbulent for decades, the Trump presidency has damaged the Canada-US PSC by: 1) exacerbating a decades-long trend of weakened shared identity and mutual trust between Canadians and Americans; and 2) undermining the democratic norms and institutions that uphold American domestic stability and Canadians' expectations of peaceful change. I argue the Canada-US PSC cannot endure if the United States does not also consider Canada's national and security interests, or if the United States itself poses a threat to those interests. Without the foundations of shared identity, mutual trust, and democratic stability, the future absence of war in North America may reflect American domination over a weaker and dependent Canada.

The concept of the PSC is examined exclusively with respect to the Canada-US dyad. A PSC describes a zone of peace where war has become unthinkable, spaces where sovereign units overcome suspicion on the basis of mutual interest, and a "we feeling" in a virtuous circle reinforcing trust, mutual consideration and sympathy, loyalty, partial mutual

identification of self-interest and images, and "mutually successful predictions of behaviour."<sup>1</sup> PSCs share characteristics such as shared identities, values, and meanings; many-sided and direct relations; and long term interest and altruism that produce mutual trust and "dependable expectations of peaceful change."<sup>2</sup> The basic conditions of shared identity and mutual trust have defined the bilateral relationship since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, but *comprehensive* security communities, such as the Canada-US PSC, also have expectations of peaceful change within their domestic politics. The basis of the North American zone of peace has been generally recognized as the stable democratic norms and institutions that have characterized both Canada and the United States.

PSCs can also regress from amity to conflict if underlying conditions are not stable. The Canada-US PSC was formed through the processes of: 1) demilitarizing the border, and 2) elite imagining of a shared North American identity based on "cultural similarity, democracy, openness, the undefended border" and the "use of arbitration and other depoliticized methods of conflict resolution."<sup>3</sup> Since the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Canada-US PSC has been institutionalized through deep security,

intelligence, and military cooperation and continental defence, such as the Permanent Joint Board on Defence (PJBD), NATO, NORAD, and the Five Eyes. If these processes or institutions are undermined, the security community may be affected.

## The Trump Presidency and the Canada-US PSC

Many actions by the Trump Administration challenge Canada's national interests, including:

1. Undermining NATO and weakening US commitment to Article 5
2. Threatened cancellation of NAFTA
3. Involving Canada in the geopolitical rivalry between the US and China
4. Weakening the nuclear arms limitation regime
5. Undermining global climate change governance
6. Characterizing Canada's legal claims to the Northwest Passage as "illegitimate"
7. Imposing tariffs on Canadian steel and aluminum exports on the basis of national security
8. The Soleimani assassination leading to the downing of Ukrainian Airlines Flight 752
9. The US response to the COVID-19 pandemic

Together with longer term divergence in social values and shared identity, these actions have damaged mutual trust and called into question whether Canada and the United States still share "a common security culture – an intersubjective system of meanings about international threats and their required solutions,"<sup>4</sup> including whether North America as a whole is still considered a referent object of security and defence policy.

### *Shared Identity*

A shared North American identity emerged in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century based on "cultural similarity, democracy, openness, the undefended border, and the [...] use of arbitration and other depoliticized methods of conflict resolution."<sup>5</sup> Since the 1960s, the gap between Canadians and Americans has widened as the latter became increasingly polarized while Canadians remain relatively unified around national values of human rights, gender equity, respect for the law, and ethnic and cultural diversity. Donald Trump has further weakened a shared North American identity by alienating Canadians from the United States. From a high in 2014 of nearly 65% of Canadians who felt that Canada was becoming more like the US, the number declined to 25% in 2017; 52% indicated Canada *should* become less like the United States and only 8% more like it.<sup>6</sup> 56% of Canadians had an unfavourable impression of the United States in 2018 with only 39% favourable. In 2018, 66% of Canadians felt relations with the United States had worsened since 2017, and 82% felt the US took Canada's interests into account "not too much or not at all,"<sup>7</sup> reflecting their loss of trust in both the president and the country itself. All this distinguishes Trump from his two immediate predecessors, neither of whose popularity had a significant effect on Canadians' attitudes towards America or support for US policies.

### *Mutual Trust*

The Trump presidency has damaged mutual trust in at least two ways. First, reversing America's international commitments is the cornerstone of Trump's foreign policy, typically without consideration for US allies. The president also routinely reverses and contradicts himself and his officials on policy matters. Combined with high turnover of foreign policy officials and the conduct of foreign policy-via-tweet, Trump's refusal to support institutions the U.S. helped establish, abide

by the U.S.'s legal obligations, or specify consistent policies on a range of international issues has damaged American credibility. Second, as an individual, Donald Trump has demonstrated himself to be untrustworthy through his numerous lies (including about Canada), fraudulent business and personal history, and his Administration's historical lack of lack of transparency. Canadians have taken note: "More than 80% of Canadians see the US President as arrogant, mean, unethical, thoughtless, undisciplined, and someone with bad values. Large majorities see him as dumb, unprincipled, ignorant and dishonest,"<sup>8</sup> and "there is no regional or demographic group anywhere in Canada that gives President Trump a net positive approval rating."<sup>9</sup>

### *Democratic Decline*

Perhaps the greatest harm caused by the Trump presidency to the Canada-US PSC is through the damage to democratic norms and institutions in the United States. The details are numerous, but can be summarized in four categories: 1) Trump's offensive personal conduct; 2) Trump's obstruction of justice; 3) Trump's unconstitutional conduct; and 4) undemocratic conduct by the Republican Party. The last is significant as the GOP is the most powerful US political party, although it is not popular. Under Trump, the GOP has impeded congressional oversight, fostered populist anger and mistrust of media, restricted voting rights, fueled Republican voters' increasing support the undemocratic processes and institutions, and embraced pseudo-authoritarian politics. Trump and his advisors have frequently speculated about extending his presidency beyond the constitutionally-permitted two terms, and regularly cast doubt on the integrity of US elections, fueling concern that Trump could refuse to concede the 2020 presidential election should he lose. Scenes during the pandemic of heavily armed groups of citizens and self-identified militia members, encouraged by Trump, defying

state and local public health orders by gathering publicly at legislatures and public buildings – praising Trump, threatening violence to Democratic officials, and forcing the suspension of legislative proceedings – further illustrate these concerns. All this strengthens the evidence for democratic "deconsolidation" within the United States.<sup>10</sup>

The decline of US democracy has not been lost on Canadians, 59% of whom indicate they do *not* feel the US government "respects the personal freedoms of its people" under President Trump, compared to 38% who do.<sup>11</sup> By contrast, in 2013, 75% of Canadians agreed the United States respected individual freedoms. If a shared commitment to democracy was key to forming the Canada-US PSC, democratic decline within one member will weaken the community's common identity, particularly if the other units maintain their democratic values and institutions. As close observers of the democratic decline, social instability, and political violence roiling the United States, Canadians' expectations of peaceful change have been shaken.

## Conclusion

The combination of a weakened shared identity, loss of mutual trust, and democratic decline in the United States risk serious damage to the Canada-US PSC, and call into question whether it remains an accurate characterization of their relationship. Instability and the risk of political violence surrounding the 2020 US election damage expectations of non-violence and democracy in the United States, which are foundational to the Canada-US PSC. The threatened cancellation of NAFTA, imposition of trade sanctions on spurious national security grounds, and myopically nationalistic and politicized response to the COVID-19 pandemic, *inter alia*, illustrate that without effective democratic norms and institutions, there

are few safeguards for Canada, as the weaker partner, against the coercive exercise of US power without regard for Canadian preferences or national interests. Since Trump's foreign policy is purposeful only insofar as it benefits his personal interests, it comes at the expense of shared identity, mutual trust, and US democracy, the Trump presidency pushes the Canada-US PSC closer to a threshold beyond which North American 'we-ness' dissolves.

While a change in US leadership would improve relations, it is unlikely to fully repair the damage caused during the Trump presidency. Trump has affected the US government's organizational and leadership culture, and deeply alienated Canadians from alignment with the United States; mutual trust has been damaged, and the bilateral relationship is

unlikely to recover quickly. Even once it does, the current situation demonstrates that Americans can elect a president who deliberately harms allies and Americans do not seem to care, and government bureaucracy is unable to prevent it. With the risk of political violence and constitutional turmoil surrounding the 2020 election, Canadians must recognize that the PSC with the United States may be less durable than expected. Without a PSC, power relations in North America favour the United States, so while Canada-US bonds remain strong, and shared identity and mutual trust can be repaired by the next president, Canada should not take for granted relations with the US. Even within a PSC, Canada cannot rely upon the United States to protect its national security or interests, particularly against the vicissitudes of American power.

## Notes

---

<sup>1</sup> Karl W. Deutsch et al., *Political Community and the North Atlantic Area*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957: 36.

<sup>2</sup> Emanuel Adler and Michael Barnett, "A Framework for the Study of Security Communities." In *Security Communities*, eds. Emanuel Adler and Michael Barnett. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998: 31; Deutsch et al., 1957: 5

<sup>3</sup> Sean M. Shore, "No Fences Make Good Neighbours: The Development of the Canadian-US Security Community, 1871-1940." In *Security Communities*, eds. Emmanuel Adler and Michael Barnett. Cambridge University Press, 1998: 348.

<sup>4</sup> Vincent Pouliot, "The Alive and Well Transatlantic Security Community: A Theoretical Reply to Michael Cox." *European Journal of International Relations* 12, no. 1 (2006): 123.

<sup>5</sup> Shore, 1998: 348.

<sup>6</sup> Ekos. 2017. *Open Versus Ordered: Cultural Expressions of the New Outlook*. Ottawa: Ekos Politics, 7.  
[http://www.ekospolitics.com/wp-content/uploads/open\\_vs\\_ordered\\_october\\_10\\_2017b.pdf](http://www.ekospolitics.com/wp-content/uploads/open_vs_ordered_october_10_2017b.pdf).

<sup>7</sup> Wike, Richard, Bruce Stokes, Jacob Poushter, Laura Silver, Janell Fetterolf, and Kat Devlin. 2018. "America's international image continues to suffer." Pew Research Centre. October 1. <https://www.pewglobal.org/2018/10/01/americas-international-image-continues-to-suffer/>.

<sup>8</sup> Bruce Anderson and David Coletto, "Trump and Canadians: It's Not Going Well." Abacus Data. June 10, 2017.  
<https://abacusdata.ca/trump-and-canadians-its-not-going-well/>.

<sup>9</sup> Ekos, 2017: 6.

<sup>10</sup> Roberto Stefan Foa and Yascha Mounk, "The Signs of Deconsolidation." *Journal of Democracy* 28, no. 4 (2017): 5-15; Paul Howe, "Eroding Norms and Democratic Deconsolidation." *Journal of Democracy* 28, no. 4 (2017): 15-29.

<sup>11</sup> Wike et al., 2018.