



CANADIAN GLOBAL AFFAIRS INSTITUTE  
INSTITUT CANADIEN DES AFFAIRES MONDIALES

# **Oh Canada: A Canadian Risk Assessment of the United States**

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June 2022

# POLICY PERSPECTIVE

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Recently, two [respected groups of](#) Canadian experts (many retired from extensive government service) have [published reviews of the Canadian national security strategies](#). They had an unusual warning for Canada. Along with a focus on issues you might expect, such as global warming and competition with Russia, the University of Ottawa review voiced this surprising concern:

The [Canadian trucker] protests [at the U.S.-Canada border] also pointed to a broader and potentially existential question for Canada: the implications of democratic backsliding in the United States. Should scenarios of widespread political violence in our southern neighbour materialize, how should Canada respond? This question would have been fanciful only a few years ago, but it is very real today ... An increasingly unpredictable and unilateral United States – especially if Donald Trump, or a like-minded Republican, wins the presidency in 2024 – could raise difficult questions. The United States is and will remain our closest ally, but it could also become a source of threat and instability.

Which raises a fascinating question. There must be a Canadian intelligence threat assessment of the United States, because to fail to have one would be professional malpractice of the highest order and the Canadian intelligence services are too competent to have ignored the question. On the other hand, no Canadian government could publicly acknowledge the existence of such an assessment, because doing so would be intensely politically embarrassing and disclosing the contents of the assessment would, of course, be contrary to Canada's national interests. So, the assessment must be buried under the highest security classification possible, and we can only imagine its contents.

But we **can** speculate: What does the Canadian assessment of the United States actually say? Herewith some thoughts about what the executive summary of such a document might contain. We might imagine the director of the [Canadian Security Intelligence Service](#) writing as follows:

## Threat Assessment

- We assess with a high degree of confidence that **the United States will continue to experience significant political polarization for at least the next decade**, if not longer. Though the Americans like to think of themselves as a melting pot, the reality is that there is significant economic and cultural disparity across the country. For many years, their system of federalism, combined with a shared commitment to ideals of American exceptionalism, masked much of this disparity. Past polarizing incidents (such as the Vietnam war and Watergate) soon yielded to instincts of commonality. Today, under pressure from increased cultural and economic divergence, fueled at least in part by the fractionalization of political discourse that is enabled by social media, the common thread of the American experience is unravelling. Americans [increasingly talk only to like-minded citizens](#) and increasingly view those with whom they disagree as ill-motivated. The trend lines over the past decade are clear and we do not anticipate an easy or prompt reversal. President Joe Biden's [stated goal of binding the nation back together](#) has not been achieved, by any



reasonable metric. Over the next decade (at a minimum), we expect American political polarization to continue.

- We assess with a moderate degree of confidence that the **polarization will lead to an increasing trend of politically related violence**. The polarization we anticipate is, to a large degree, driven by perceptions of difference. Claims that Black Lives Matter are met with claims that Critical Race Theory is ahistorical. Central to these claims of difference and disparity are underlying themes of animosity, bordering on hatred. As the degree of polarization increases, we are moderately confident that the animosity will likewise increase with a concomitant increase in the possibility of political violence. Already, [political rhetoric](#) speaks of the [need for a “civil war.”](#) The trend will be exacerbated by the [widespread availability of guns in America](#) (while difficult to track, it is also having a [collateral effect in Canada](#)). While there is a significant residue of inherent good will in the American polity, we fear that the instinct for violence will only increase in the years to come.
- We assess with a low degree of confidence that **the anti-democracy/authoritarian political viewpoint will emerge as the controlling political viewpoint in America**. It is difficult, if not impossible, to predict with any high degree of confidence how America’s political future will play out in the coming years. On one hand, the institutions of democracy in America have thus far proven resilient and resistant to anti-democratic impulses. Most notably, the January 6 assault on the Capitol was unsuccessful in forestalling the transfer of power. On the other hand, there are signs that political operatives are attempting to take control of the electoral system in ways that are reminiscent of Viktor Orban’s success in Hungary. [Local election boards are at risk](#), as are [state-level election systems](#). We assess that resistance to those authoritarian impulses is thus far disorganized, and only partially effective. It remains to be seen whether the democratic institutions will be suitably reinforced. Our guarded, pessimistic, tentative view is that they will not be sufficiently resistant.
- We assess with a medium degree of confidence that **the United States will increasingly pursue isolationist trade policies** that impact trade with other nations, **with either direct or collateral adverse effect on Canada**. The dominant wing of the Republican party is increasingly isolationist in its tendencies. Former president Donald Trump’s use of tariffs to “punish” perceived adversaries [has already had adverse impacts on the Canadian economy](#). But the anti-trade impulse is also shared by [the more progressive elements of the American polity](#), who see international trade agreements as a threat to American jobs. Increasingly, the centrist consensus in favour of global trade is eroding in America (as it is around the world) and we foresee a further modest erosion of that consensus in the near term. To be sure, America will never be able to completely divorce itself from the global economy, but we expect it to increasingly seek to minimize its reliance on foreign trade. The challenge for Canada is to convince Americans that for reasons of mutual benefit, Canada should be included within the trade and security perimeter, as it was able to do after 9/11 with the Smart Border Accord.



- We also think with a medium degree of confidence **that the United States will continue the trend of disengagement** from international military obligations in Europe and Asia. America's relative disengagement from international obligations [began under former president Barack Obama](#). It accelerated under Trump, whose [antipathy to NATO](#) and to [treaty obligations in Asia is well-documented](#). Biden has stemmed the trend for now, but his success is contingent. Most obviously, it is at risk from a return to isolationist policies in the next administration. The small, but vocal number of Republican politicians [who oppose assistance to Ukraine](#) is emblematic of that risk. However, we also assess that the current interventionist consensus on the American left is unlikely to be sustained. Since the Vietnam era, many liberals have doubted the utility of America's role abroad and that trend, too, will likely continue. Therefore, we foresee a lessening of America's overseas commitments. While we assess that the trend line is clear, we are unable to assess with confidence the rate and pace at which the lessening of engagement will likely occur.
- We assess with a high degree of confidence that **discussions about the dissolution of the United States will be normalized**. Canadians, of course, are familiar with this kind of debate given the separatist movement in Quebec and Western Canadian feelings of alienation. Today, the concept of dissolution – the idea that some states may secede from the American Union – is the topic of fringe discussion in corners of the web. Increasingly, however, mainstream political figures, [such as Texas Senator Ted Cruz](#), have begun to notice the concept and have given it greater public saliency. Given the way in which social media functions on the American right, we are highly confident that the idea of seceding from the Union will soon begin to receive serious treatment in think tanks and through conservative media channels. There will soon be symposiums devoted to its analysis at conservative educational institutions. However, we assess that the **actual dissolution of the United States is unlikely**. The United States fought a civil war 160 years ago to reject that very premise and it seems unlikely it will fight another one over the same subject. However, the turmoil created by discussion of the topic will only further fuel political instability in the United States.

## Implications for Canada

- We assess with a high degree of confidence that **political polarization in the United States will have spill-over political impact in Canada**. We have already seen evidence, in the 2022 trucker protests, that [America's political polarization is resonating with a portion of the Canadian polity](#). There is also clear indication that at least [a portion of the funding for this political movement originates outside of Canada](#). To the extent that the authoritarian anti-political party in America gains further influence south of the border, it is inevitable that its success will have collateral effects in Canada. Therefore, Canada urgently needs to strengthen its ability to respond to the anti-democratic impulse. We need to build institutional capabilities to counteract disinformation originating in America and to short-circuit the ability of American actors to influence Canadian politics. Working with the provinces, civics education needs to be re-emphasized, as well.



- We assess with a medium degree of confidence that **trade between Canada and the United States will continue to be adversely impacted in the coming decades.** This means Canada will need to continue our Team Canada advocacy efforts with Congress, state and local governments as well as U.S. interest groups, involving not just the national government but members of all parties at the different levels of government, working in tandem with business, labour and civil society. As we noted earlier, America's trade policy is likely to grow more isolationist. As [one of America's largest trading partners](#), and with [America as Canada's largest export destination](#), any change in how the United States views trade will have a direct impact on the Canadian economy. Canada can never be economically independent from the United States; our economies are too deeply intertwined. But it is in our best strategic interest to diversify our overseas export and import base as rapidly as is practicable.
- We assess with a medium degree of confidence that **cross-border travel between Canada and the United States will become increasingly difficult.** We foresee a tightening of the American southern land border, whether by virtue of direct efforts under a new Republican administration or because Democratic leaders necessarily react to the flow of illegal migrants through Mexico. As Canada did after 9/11, we will need to continue our efforts to differentiate between the two borders, reminding Americans that Canada is a reliable ally (NORAD and NATO); that we have essentially harmonized our visa regime; and that our information-sharing practices are working to ensure perimeter security. In either case, the current situation at America's southern border cannot be sustained. Any tightening of the southern border will likely have an impact on travel across America's northern border with Canada. We have seen (e.g., the [Western Hemisphere Travel Initiative](#)) that America acts unilaterally with respect to its border with Canada when it deems that to be in its interests. We are reasonably confident that the pattern will not change and that further travel limitations will gradually be implemented in the coming years. This, too, will require a revision to Canadian expectations and a modification of our own travel regulations.
- We assess with a medium degree of confidence that **American disengagement globally will create opportunities for adversary nations to destabilize the existing international order.** If, as we posit, America is likely to disengage more from world affairs, the implications of that disengagement are clear. We have already seen adverse impacts, notably in Chinese adventurism, and more recently, in the Russian assault on Ukraine. We can hope that other Western nations in NATO and in the Five Eyes will take up the slack, but the reality is that America has been, and remains, the essential Western power. As we learned during the Trump administration, efforts led by the French and Germans to create an alliance for multilateralism were ineffectual. Its retreat from global responsibilities will inevitably create a multi-polar world of greater instability. Canada will need to reinforce its alliances with other Western nations and stand at the forefront of defending the existing world order. We will likely need to significantly increase our investment in the military in order to sustain our efforts.



- We assess with a high degree of confidence that **Canadian border security will need to be upgraded**. In this report, we have sought to identify some likely scenarios for the next 10 years. But even if our scenarios are inaccurate as to the specifics, we are highly confident in our prediction of the general trends in America. We foresee a significant degree of social, political and economic disruption in the United States over the coming decade. No matter what form that disruption ultimately takes, the 5,525-mile-long border we have with America will need to be reinforced to guard against the effects of that disruption being felt here in Canada. To that end, we need to ensure that the [Canada Border Services Agency](#) and the policing and other security and intelligence agencies that support its work are fit for purpose.
- We assess with a high degree of confidence that a **military confrontation between the United States and Canada is unlikely**. We know that [at least as recently as the 1930s](#), America had war plans for the invasion of Canada, and the social disruptions we anticipate may well exacerbate political tensions between the United States and Canada. But, given the isolationist tendencies we have identified and the anti-military engagement themes we see strengthening in America, we remain confident that a military confrontation with America is highly unlikely, especially given our military alliances and the close co-operation between our security and intelligence agencies.

Of course, all of this is speculation. However, Canadians must be wondering what the future holds, and it is a reasonable bet that their own perspectives on the future bear some moderate resemblance to the foregoing. It is not for nothing that the late comedian Robin Williams' [quip about Canadians feeling like they live above a meth lab](#) enjoys continued popularity as a meme, but there has always been an element of schadenfreude vis a vis our superpower neighbour. And that, in turn, is a depressing thought – for both Canadians and their downstairs neighbours.



## About the Author

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*Paul Rosenzweig is an accomplished writer and speaker with a national reputation in cyber security and homeland security. He is the founder of Red Branch Consulting PLLC, a homeland security consulting company. He is also a Senior Advisor to The Chertoff Group. Mr. Rosenzweig formerly served as Deputy Assistant Secretary for Policy in the Department of Homeland Security.*

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*He is the author of Cyber Warfare: How Conflicts in Cyberspace are Challenging America and Changing the World and of three video lecture series from The Great Courses, Thinking About Cybersecurity: From Cyber Crime to Cyber Warfare; The Surveillance State: Big Data, Freedom, and You; and Investigating American Presidents.*

*He is the co-author (with James Jay Carafano) of Winning the Long War: Lessons from the Cold War for Defeating Terrorism and Preserving Freedom and co-editor (with Jill D. Rhodes and Robert S. Litt) of the Cybersecurity Handbook (3<sup>rd</sup> ed.). He is also co-editor (with Timothy McNulty and Ellen Shearer) of two books, Whistleblowers, Leaks and the Media: The First Amendment and National Security, and National Security Law in the News: A Guide for Journalists, Scholars, and Policymakers. Mr. Rosenzweig is a member of the Literary Society of Washington.*



## **Canadian Global Affairs Institute**

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The Institute was created to bridge the gap between what Canadians need to know about Canadian international activities and what they do know. Historically Canadians have tended to look abroad out of a search for markets because Canada depends heavily on foreign trade. In the modern post-Cold War world, however, global security and stability have become the bedrocks of global commerce and the free movement of people, goods and ideas across international boundaries. Canada has striven to open the world since the 1930s and was a driving factor behind the adoption of the main structures which underpin globalization such as the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, the World Trade Organization and emerging free trade networks connecting dozens of international economies. The Canadian Global Affairs Institute recognizes Canada's contribution to a globalized world and aims to inform Canadians about Canada's role in that process and the connection between globalization and security.

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