



America Is Actively Choosing Decline; It's Time for Canada to Adapt to a Changing World Order

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This study was commissioned by the Centre for Civic Engagement. The CCE is a non-partisan Canadian charity dedicated to conducting original research on public policy issues related to Canadian prosperity, productivity, and national flourishing. The CCE's research informs an active program of policy seminars, events, conferences, and lectures all aimed at providing the policy making community with actionable insights that encourage informed decision making on issues that matter to Canadians.

Introduction

The late American-born yet Canadian-raised conservative columnist Charles Krauthammer had a gift for coining phrases that defined big ideas or moments. He attributed this to his previous life as a psychiatrist. Working in medicine, one came to understand the power of naming things.¹

In January 1990, he coined a term that would come to define much of the subsequent 30 years of international order—the unipolar moment.²

As the Cold War was winding down, it was widely assumed that the world order would move to a structure of multipolarity, with the United States becoming one among other great powers like the ascendant economic powerhouses of a reunified Germany, Japan, and the soon-to-be-formed European Union. There was also an ascendant China that was beginning to realize the wealth-generating benefits of Deng Xiaoping's economic reforms.

Yet the much-anticipated multipolar world never came about. The dissolution of the Soviet Union instead gave rise to the U.S. as the sole global superpower, possessing unmatched military, economic, and diplomatic capabilities. The next three decades were marked by American primacy. Krauthammer was proven right.

However, that he saw the true nature of the coming world order and the benefits of American unipolarity to itself and others isn't even the most insightful part of his analysis. Krauthammer also recognized that ***American primacy was a choice, and so too was American decline.***

He would say as much in a 2009 lecture at a time when ordinary Americans were beginning to doubt the broad benefits of Pax Americana.³ Krauthammer not only contended that America's potential decline wouldn't be an inevitable consequence of external forces but the result of internal decisions, but he warned that such an outcome would be bad for the United States and the world. As he put it: "America is in the position of deciding whether to abdicate or retain its dominance. Decline—or continued ascendancy—is in our hands."

Four weeks into President Trump's second term, it seems increasingly clear that America is making its choice: it's choosing decline.

The ideas behind this declinist bent vary a bit. But they all reach the same essential conclusion: the Trump administration's foreign policy is about managing American's relative decline and the end of unipolarity.

It's hard to overstate what a shift in thinking this represents for the United States in general and among American conservatives in particular. It stands in sharp contrast the vision of American global leadership articulated by President Ronald Reagan in the context of the Cold War. Reagan famously rejected the notion of détente in favour of American primacy and, in so doing, laid the intellectual groundwork for the defeat of the Soviet Union and the post-Cold War era of relative peace and prosperity.

¹ Bill Kristol and Charles Krauthammer, "Conversation with Charles Krauthammer," in *Conversations with Bill Kristol*, April 13, 2015, <https://conversationswithbillkristol.org/transcript/charles-krauthammer-transcript/>.

² Charles Krauthammer, "The Unipolar Moment," *Foreign Affairs* 70, no.1 (1990), <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/1990-01-01/unipolar-moment>.

³ Charles Krauthammer, "2009 Wriston Lecture: Decline is a Choice," *The Manhattan Institute* (2009, October 5), <https://manhattan.institute/event/2009-wriston-lecture-decline-is-a-choice>.

Today there's no prominent political voice advancing Reagan's case for American primacy. Instead, the overriding consensus among key figures in the Trump administration and the intellectuals in its adjacency is the objective of contemporary American foreign policy is to oversee the transition to a multipolar world in which the United States is a major power but no longer a superpower. To borrow from Krauthammer, the goal of American policy is managed decline.

This understanding of the underlying assumptions and ideas of U.S. foreign policy has huge implications for Canada. It's not about trade irritants or even Canadian defence spending. The Trump administration's destabilizing actions are motivated in part by a reconceptualized view about American power and its role in the world. Our policymakers must therefore begin thinking about Canadian interests in a new global order.

Reagan and the Choice of American Primacy

Before coming to office, Reagan encapsulated his foreign policy views towards the Soviet Union in the provocative statement: "My idea of American policy toward the Soviet Union is simple, and some would say simplistic. It is this: We win and they lose."⁴

It was seen at a time as a radical proposition. America's Cold War policy had been predicated on the notion of détente, which took for granted that American primacy was neither possible nor desirable. Therefore, the goal of U.S. policy was to manage bipolarity. Diplomacy, arms control agreements like the Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT), and different forms of economic engagement prioritized conflict avoidance over checking the Soviet Union's global influence.

While détente had its critics such as American neoconservatives like Norman Podhoretz, it was the overwhelming consensus among U.S. politicians and intellectuals.⁵ Reagan's rejection in favour of the goal of primacy was thus characterized as both ignorant and dangerous.⁶ There was a sense that his provocations might turn a cold war into a hot war.

In practice, however, Reagan's foreign policy was marked by a dual strategy of military strength and diplomatic engagement. His approach to the Soviet Union, defence spending, NATO relations, summit diplomacy, and free trade showcased a blend of ideological conviction and pragmatic restraint.

His inaugural address captured this nuance:

"We will again be the exemplar of freedom and a beacon of hope for those who do not now have freedom.

To those neighbors and allies who share our freedom, we will strengthen our historic ties and assure them of our support and firm commitment. We will match loyalty with loyalty. We will strive for mutually beneficial relations. We will not use our friendship to impose on their sovereignty, for our own sovereignty is not for sale.

As for the enemies of freedom, those who are potential adversaries, they will be reminded that peace is the highest aspiration of the American people. We will negotiate for it, sacrifice for it; we will not surrender for it, now or ever."⁷

American primacy for Reagan was not simply about dominance by brute force. While military strength was key, America was also to be a shining city on a hill, a beacon of hope, and an example of freedom and prosperity to the world.

⁴ Bill of Rights Institute, "Tear Down This Wall": Ronald Reagan and the End of the Cold War," *The Bill of Rights Institute*, <https://billofrightsinstitute.org/essays/tear-down-this-wall-ronald-reagan-and-the-end-of-the-cold-war>.

⁵ Norman Podhoretz, "Making the World Safe for Communism," *Commentary* (1976, April), <https://www.commentary.org/articles/norman-podhoretz/making-the-world-safe-for-communism/>.

⁶ Christopher Burkett, "Reagan's 'tear down this wall' speech still teaches how to confront Russia," *Ashbrook* (2022, June 12), <https://ashbrook.org/viewpoint/reagans-tear-down-this-wall-speech-still-teaches-how-to-confront-russia/>.

⁷ Ronald Reagan, "Inaugural Address 1981," *Ronald Reagan Presidential Library* (1981), <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/archives/speech/inaugural-address-1981>.

What Did Reagan's Foreign Policy Look Like in Practice?

An immediate change was in the American posture toward the Soviets. Reagan pursued a resolute anti-Communist agenda, focusing on weakening the Soviet Union through economic, political, and military pressure.⁸ His administration implemented policies like the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI) and supported anti-Communist movements globally, including the Contras in Nicaragua and the mujahideen in Afghanistan.

A key component of this strategy was a significant rebuilding of American defence capabilities. By the end of the 1970s, American defence spending as a share of GDP had fallen to five percent, but by 1980, it had risen to 6.8 percent before tapering off as the US economy was booming.⁹ In terms of hard numbers, Reagan and Congress increased American defence spending from \$177 billion in 1981 to \$322 billion by 1989.¹⁰

However, despite his tough rhetoric, famously labeling the USSR the “evil empire,” and the military build-up, Reagan also sought dialogue, notably with Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev.¹¹ This dual approach led to landmark agreements, including the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty in 1987, which marked a significant step in arms reduction.

Indeed, diplomacy, alliances, and cooperation were not anathema to Reagan's foreign policy. For instance, Reagan reinforced U.S. commitments to NATO, emphasizing collective defense and deploying Pershing II missiles in Europe to counter the Soviet SS-20s, despite significant public protests in Europe.¹²

Moreover, summit diplomacy became a hallmark of Reagan's presidency.¹³ His meetings with Gorbachev, including the Geneva Summit (1985) and Reykjavik Summit (1986), were pivotal in building mutual trust and advancing arms control negotiations. While Reykjavik did not yield an agreement on nuclear abolition, it laid the groundwork for future treaties and a significant thaw in U.S.-Soviet relations.

Notably, in contrast to contemporary conservative views under Trump, Reagan was a staunch advocate of free trade, viewing open markets as integral to economic growth and global stability. His administration promoted trade liberalization through bilateral and multilateral agreements, aligning with his broader vision of a world connected by free enterprise. Of course, one of these agreements was the 1987 Canada-United States Free Trade Agreement (CUSFTA).¹⁴

⁸ Robert G. Kaufman, “The First Principles of Ronald Reagan's Foreign Policy,” *The Heritage Foundation* (2011), <https://static.heritage.org/2011/pdf/fp0040.pdf>; Colin Dueck, *Hard Line: The Republican Party and U.S. Foreign Policy since World War II*, (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2011).

⁹ “Military expenditure (% of GDP) – United States,” *The World Bank*, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/MS.MIL.XPND.GD.ZS?locations=US>.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ Melvyn P. Leffler, “Ronald Reagan and the Cold War: What Mattered Most,” *Texas National Security Review* 1, no.3 (2018), <https://tnsr.org/2018/05/ronald-reagan-and-the-cold-war-what-mattered-most/>; Philip H. Gordon, “Maximum pressure brought down the Soviet Union’ and other lies we tell ourselves,” *War on the Rocks* (2020, October 22), <https://warontherocks.com/2020/10/maximum-pressure-brought-down-the-soviet-union-and-other-lies-we-tell-ourselves/>.

¹² Kaufman, “The First Principles of Ronald Reagan's Foreign Policy.”

¹³ Leffler, “Ronald Reagan and the Cold War.”

¹⁴ “Canada-U.S. Free Trade Agreement,” *The Government of Canada* (2021), https://www.international.gc.ca/trade-commerce/trade-agreements-accords-commerciaux/agr-acc/united_states-etats_unis/fta-ale/background-contexte.aspx?lang=eng.

At the agreement's signing, Reagan stated, "We must make sure the freedoms we enjoy include the freedom to choose at home and the freedom to be chosen abroad. This nation, which was born to nurture human freedoms, must take the lead in establishing the principle that one of the most important human freedoms is free exchange."¹⁵

This is a strong contrast to Trump's conservatism, but by championing free trade, Reagan positioned the United States as a global economic leader, reinforcing his vision of American primacy while recognizing the interdependence of global economies

However, Reagan's views and execution of American foreign policy were not without its detractors in the conservative intellectual movement, particularly among voices associated with neo-conservatism.¹⁶

Neoconservatives like Norman Podhoretz lambasted Reagan for his willingness to negotiate with the Soviet Union, accusing him of appeasement and of failing to push aggressively for the USSR's collapse.¹⁷ Podhoretz argued that Reagan's pursuit of arms control agreements, particularly the INF Treaty, reflected a capitulation to Soviet demands rather than a demonstration of American strength.¹⁸

At the same time, paleoconservatives like Pat Buchanan criticized Reagan's interventions in Central America and his broader anti-Communist agenda, viewing these efforts as costly entanglements that risked undermining U.S. interests.¹⁹ These critiques highlighted broader disagreements over the balance between interventionism and restraint, with some conservatives favouring a more isolationist approach.

Despite these divisions, Reagan's foreign policy ultimately garnered widespread approval within the Republican Party, particularly as the Cold War drew to a close in a manner that vindicated many of his strategies.²⁰

The Reagan vision and policy was one of cooperative American primacy. It eschewed notions of bipolarity with the Soviets while recognizing that American foreign policy is maximized when it is not alone.

¹⁵ Ronald Reagan, "Remarks on Signing the United States-Canada Free-Trade Agreement Implementation Act of 1988," *Ronald Reagan Presidential Library* (1988), <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/archives/speech/remarks-signing-united-states-canada-free-trade-agreement-implementation-act-1988>.

¹⁶ W. James Antle III, "When the Right Hated Reagan," *The National Interest* (2014, March 15), <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/when-the-right-hated-reagan-10055>; Gene Healy, "Reagan Was No Neocon," *The Cato Institute* (2011, February 1), <https://www.cato.org/commentary/reagan-was-no-neocon>; Jack Hunter, "Stop Equating Reagan with Neoconservatism," *The American Conservative* (2024, July 20), <https://www.theamericanconservative.com/stop-equating-reagan-with-neoconservatism/>.

¹⁷ Norman Podhoretz, "The Neo-Conservative Anguish over Reagan's Foreign Policy," *The New York Times* (1982, May 2), <https://www.nytimes.com/1982/05/02/magazine/the-neo-conservative-anguish-over-reagan-s-foreign-policy.html?pagewanted=1>.

¹⁸ Healy, "Reagan Was No Neocon."

¹⁹ Antle III, "When the Right Hated Reagan."

²⁰ Evan D. McCormick, "Policy Roundtable: Does Reagan's Foreign Policy Legacy Live On?," *Texas National Security Review* (2018), <https://tnsr.org/roundtable/policy-roundtable-does-reagans-foreign-policy-legacy-live-on/>.

Trump and the Embrace of American Decline

Fast forward over 30 years since Reagan left office, and a radically different set of ideas and policies is animating Trumpian conservatism.

During his first and now second term, Trump's foreign policy is characterized by the "America First" doctrine, emphasizing U.S. national interests, economic protectionism, and a departure from traditional multilateral engagements. This approach is leading to significant shifts in international relations and America's role on the global stage.

It is based on a worldview that is fundamentally different than Reagan's. Trade, for example, is not viewed as a positive for the American economy, but rather as being responsible for immense job losses and a hollowing out of certain sectors. Put in Trumpian parlance, international trade and trade deficits mean that America is "losing."²¹ As such, Trump is now using tariffs as an economic weapon to extract concessions from not just adversaries like China, but also its closest allies like Canada.²²

Another hallmark of Trump's foreign policy is skepticism toward multilateral institutions and agreements. During his first term, the administration withdrew the United States from the Paris Climate Agreement (and again in the second term), the Iran nuclear deal (JCPOA), and the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), signaling a preference for bilateral agreements that prioritized perceived immediate U.S. benefits.²³ In the second term, the retreat from multilateralism is further evidenced by the U.S. exit from several UN groups like the WHO and a recent boycott of the G20.²⁴ Foreign aid is another tool of American foreign policy that has been on the chopping block in Trump's second term.²⁵

NATO is another alliance that has seen the ire of Trump. What was once an important pillar of Reagan's Soviet containment policy appears to have little strategic value to the US in the minds of Trumpian conservatives. Trump has frequently criticized NATO allies for not meeting defense spending commitments, which is a fair criticism, and suggested a re-evaluation of U.S. participation in the alliance.²⁶

²¹ Alicia Wallace, "With tariffs and trade in the spotlight, what Trump means when he says America is 'losing' billions to Canada, others," *CNN* (2025, January 16), <https://www.cnn.com/2025/01/16/economy/us-trade-deficit-trump-200-billion/index.html>.

²² "Fact Sheet: President Donald J. Trump Imposes Tariffs on Imports from Canada, Mexico and China," *The White House* (2025, February 1), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/fact-sheets/2025/02/fact-sheet-president-donald-j-trump-imposes-tariffs-on-imports-from-canada-mexico-and-china/>.

²³ Matthew Daly and Seth Borenstein, "Trump signs executive order directing US withdrawal from the Paris climate agreement — again," *CNN* (2025, January 20), <https://apnews.com/article/trump-paris-agreement-climate-change-788907bb89fe307a964be757313cdfb0>; "President Donald J. Trump is Ending United States Participation in an Unacceptable Iran Deal," *The White House* (2018, May 8), <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefings-statements/president-donald-j-trump-ending-united-states-participation-unacceptable-iran-deal/>; "The United States Officially Withdraws from the Trans-Pacific Partnership," *Office of the United States Trade Representative* (2017, January 1), <https://ustr.gov/about-us/policy-offices/press-office/press-releases/2017/january/US-Withdraws-From-TPP>.

²⁴ "Withdrawing The United States from The World Health Organization," *The White House* (2025, January 20), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/01/withdrawing-the-united-states-from-the-worldhealth-organization/>; "Withdrawing the United States From And Ending Funding To Certain United Nations Organizations And Reviewing United States Support To All International Organizations," *The White House* (2025, February 4), <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/02/withdrawing-the-united-states-from-and-ending-funding-to-certain-united-nations-organizations-and-reviewing-united-states-support-to-all-international-organizations/>; "US skipping G20 talks due to S. Africa's 'anti-American' agenda: Rubio," *France 24* (2025, February 6), <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20250206-us-skipping-g20-talks-due-to-s-africa-s-anti-american-agenda-rubio>.

²⁵ Ellen Knickmeyer and Fatima Hussein, "Trump, Musk move to shut down USAID, staff blocked from headquarters," *Global News* (2025, February 3), <https://globalnews.ca/news/10995782/trump-musk-shut-down-usaid/>.

²⁶ Kate Sullivan, "Trump says he would encourage Russia to 'do whatever the hell they want' to any NATO country that doesn't pay enough," *CNN* (2024, February 11), <https://www.cnn.com/2024/02/10/politics/trump-russia-nato/index.html>.

Overall, the ideas behind Trump's "America First" foreign policy are deeply rooted in nationalism, economic protectionism, realism, and a broader skepticism of globalization. These principles reflect a belief that America's role in the world should be recalibrated to focus on its sovereignty, economic prosperity, and narrowly defined national interests, rather than maintaining its traditional position as a global leader.

A key component of "America First" is the prioritization of American sovereignty.²⁷ This doctrine reflects a rejection of globalist approaches that limit U.S. autonomy in favour of multilateral agreements or institutions like NATO or the UN. Proponents argue that these international systems often require America to bear disproportionate costs while constraining its ability to act independently.

Certain strands of realism and restraint also underpin the "America First" approach, advocating for foreign policies grounded in pragmatism rather than idealist ambitions.²⁸ This view calls for avoiding unnecessary interventions in foreign conflicts unless they serve clear and immediate U.S. interests. Proponents critique what they see as America's overreach in "endless wars," particularly in the Middle East, arguing for a more restrained use of military power and a focus on protecting the homeland rather than promoting democracy abroad. Proponents also call for a much clearer focus of U.S. foreign policy on containing China's rise.

Economic nationalism is another cornerstone of "America First." The Trump administration's skepticism of globalization stems from the belief that free trade agreements and global economic integration have hollowed out American manufacturing, weakened the middle class, and eroded economic sovereignty. According to Oren Cass, policies such as tariffs and efforts to bring supply chains back to the U.S. are essential to rebuilding domestic industries and reducing reliance on foreign competitors like China.²⁹

Finally, Trump's foreign policy reflects a shift from America's traditional role as a global leader toward a transactional approach to international relations. As discussed in a recent Foreign Affairs, partnerships and alliances should be evaluated based on whether they provide clear, measurable benefits to the United States, although this was arguably already the case for America's chosen position atop the international hierarchy.³⁰

These are the overarching ideas behind the conservative shift in foreign policy. But there are questions within the movement regarding how far America should go with them. New York Times columnist Ross Douthat describes these camps as the "right-sizers" who look to downsize America's global commitments while still maintaining a dominant relative position versus the "retreaters" who want to pursue an isolationist agenda that falls back to North America.³¹

Early on, it looks like the retreaters may be winning, and while our view is that many of these ideas and the policies of Trump will actually harm the United States in terms of its own national interests, economic prosperity and its ability to counter its adversaries, a full-throated rebuttal of Trump's policies or the ideas behind them is beyond our scope.

²⁷ Stewart Patrick, "Trump's Distorted View of Sovereignty and American Exceptionalism," *Carnegie Endowment* (2025, January 30), <https://carnegieendowment.org/emissary/2025/01/trump-sovereignty-american-exceptionalism?>

²⁸ John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*, (New York: W.W. Norton, 2021); Kelly Beaucar Vlahos, "Realism AND Restraint Get The Test At National Conservatism Conference," *Responsible Statecraft* (2022, September 12), <https://responsiblestatecraft.org/2022/09/11/realism-and-restraint-get-the-test-at-national-conservatism-conference/>; Eli Lake, "The Fight to Define 'America First' Foreign Policy," *The Free Press* (2025, January 26), <https://www.thefp.com/p/the-fight-to-define-america-first-foreign-policy-pete-hegseth-trump-israel-ukraine-taiwa>.

²⁹ Oren Cass, "Searching for Capitalism in the Wreckage of Globalization," *American Compass* (2022, March 9), <https://americancompass.org/searching-for-capitalism-in-the-wreckage-of-globalization/>.

³⁰ Dan Caldwell and Reid Smith, "Trump Must Not Betray 'America First'," *Foreign Affairs* (2024, November 13), <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/united-states/trump-must-not-betray-america-first>.

³¹ Ross Douthat, "Can MAGA Run the American Empire?," *The New York Times* (2025, February 8), <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/02/08/opinion/trump-usaid-maga.html>.

However, what these sets of ideas and their corresponding policies are indicative of is a clear shift from Reaganite conservatism and American primacy.

They also signal a different view of America itself. No longer is the U.S. to be viewed as an indispensable nation around the world. To Trumpian conservatives, it is simply another great power that will be competing with China and others in a bipolar or multipolar world.

In essence, what we are seeing is that without a shot being fired, America is choosing abdication and decline. It is not being forced to stand down from its position at the top of the international hierarchy. It is instead choosing to unilaterally withdraw.

And do not expect the isolationism and restraint of the “American First” intellectual and policy agenda to face any significant criticism from the right. To our knowledge, there is no significant political or public American conservative figure making the case for re-establishing American primacy, despite the clear military and economic advantages the U.S. still has.

Instead, we are left with an America in retreat and an intellectual and policy agenda that is likely to stay the course throughout the Trump presidency.

The World Order Is Shifting; Where Does This Leave Canada

With America in a global retreat, we're in a period of profound international change. The world order that the United States and Canada were instrumental in building looks to be effectively dead. While the exact contours of what comes next are unclear, it appears the world is headed towards a bipolar world and perhaps a multipolar one in the future. This world will ostensibly be shaped by different forms of economic and geopolitical blocs in which transactional relations will be predominant. One can envision such a world being marked by more uncertainty and conflict than the one that predated it.

For Canada, it is time to start thinking about what comes next, both in terms of the international structure and the policies that it needs to pursue. To this end, The Hub is proud to launch a forthcoming essay series that aims to grapple with these seismic changes and offer a clear-headed direction for Canadian foreign policy.

We'll carry out the series in the spirit of Krauthammer's adage. As he said in his 2009 lecture, "Nothing is written. Nothing is predetermined."

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