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The Choices That Were Made and Those That Remain

Re-reading “The Choice To Be Made,” -- the conclusion to the book, *An Independent Foreign Policy for that Canada?* that I edited four decades ago after organizing a year-long process of discussions between many Canadian diplomats and a cross-disciplinary group of younger academic colleagues -- gave me a strange feeling. *Plus ça change* – and much has changed in Canada’s international, continental, and domestic context -- *plus c’est la meme chose*, since much also remains the same in our seemingly eternal debate about Canada’s role in the world.

The Context: *Plus ça change*

Let’s pass in review how things were back then, what’s happened since, and how they are now in the three scales that condition the country’s foreign policy: the global, the continental, and the domestic.

Global balance of forces

Forty years later, the global balance of forces was almost unrecognizable compared to what it is today. Then, in the late 1960s, the Cold War standoff between East and West seemed frozen for ever.

Although some non-aligned countries in the developing world kept their distance from both camps, Canada, which was on the flight path for long-range bombers and intercontinental missiles between the Soviet Union and the United States, had no choice but to support the Pentagon’s strategy however mad – and the Mutually Assured Destruction on which the United States’ second-strike nuclear-retaliation doctrine was, literally, MAD. Even when outrage at the United States’ imperialist efforts to force its will on Vietnam had Canadians demonstrating by the thousands outside American consulates, Ottawa dissented from Washington’s policy at its peril, since the fear of US economic retaliation was the ever-present subtext of Canadians’ international disagreements with Uncle Sam.

Since then, with the collapse of the Soviet Union, the United States passed from being the hegemon of the West – its capitalist partners had supported Washington’s construction of a liberal global order after World War II – to being hegemon of the world: in 1995, the launch of the World Trade Organization (WTO) created a global economic order using a made in-the-USA rule book to which almost every country willingly subscribed.

Having been invited on Pierre Trudeau’s watch to join the Economic Summit, the exclusive club of the seven most powerful states, Canada had been an actively

contributing participant as the new trade régime was being negotiated. Although its relative power in the global hierarchy declined with the rise of China, India, and Brazil, Ottawa occasionally managed to matter by taking the lead in brokering such multilateral agreements as the International Criminal Court and the treaty banning anti-personnel landmines even in the face of Washington's opposition.

Now, following September 11, 2001, when the United States subordinated its economically hegemonic role to its militarily imperialist persona, which unilaterally and arbitrarily tried to spread US values in the Middle East by force, poles of resistance have sprung up. The future economic colossus, China, is even threatening United States' sense of its energy security by buying a share in Alberta's oil resources.

Based as it was on evident misinformation and miscalculation, Washington's rogue behaviour in Iraq generated such dismay among the Canadian public that the country's political elite was obliged to back away from its default position of supporting the United States. And, even though the present prime minister came to power vowing to repair relations with the George W. Bush administration that he felt had been imprudently broken by his predecessor, Jean Chrétien, Paul Martin has himself been impelled by the public's distaste for Rumsfeld militarism to decline support for the US National Missile Defense program.

Canada's position on the continent

Much has also changed in Canada's political economy position in North America. In the late 1960s, Canada was striving to find ways to reduce the bleeding caused by its US-owned and -controlled economy by constructing a more nationally focused market less vulnerable to damaging American actions.

Since then, a decade's experimentation with a more nationally focused industrial strategy flamed out in the early 1980s with the ambitious but disastrously timed National Energy Program. John Turner's self-immolation in the 1984 federal election handed power to Brian Mulroney who, having sworn to give Washington the benefit of the doubt, proceeded to sign with President Ronald Reagan a declaration of economic disarmament called the Canada-United States Free Trade Agreement. CUFTA locked Ottawa into a set of rules designed to subordinate the country's resource and manufactured production to the needs of the US economy.

Once Washington had established precedents to foreclose Canadian economic autonomy, it expanded the continental scope of what Ronald Reagan had called the economic constitution of North America by including Mexico in this integrative régime. With the North American Free Trade Agreement extending the WTO's massive and intrusive rules, Canada has saddled itself with an external constitution that sounds the death knell of an independent Canadian capitalism which could compete with the United States. Canadians' wealth remains dependent on pumping oil (for which the US thirst is insatiable), developing other economic niches (which are complementary but not competitive with US industries), hewing wood (which the US resists buying beyond the point that threatens rival US forestry interests), and, probably, drawing water (that is,

diverting water southwards -- an issue that is already on the agenda in the Great Lakes and south-western states).

Now, following close to two decades of border-lowering economic integration, Canada has been hit with Washington's latest strategic doctrine, a "war on terror" focused on a border-raising, national security priority.

Whereas Canadian leaders were able to dissent over the United States' position on Iraq, they have no freedom to diverge over its border policies, because in the Bush administration's view, security trumps trade. If Ottawa does not satisfy Washington that the Canada-US boundary is secure against terrorists -- meaning that its immigration policies, its anti-terrorism secret policing, and its passport control processes meet with the approval of the Department of Homeland Security -- the economic arteries that now flow from North to South will be blocked.

Canada's domestic scene

By 1968, the federal and provincial governments had put in place the healthcare system that was to become, with the Canadian flag, a defining element of Canadians' national identity.

Since then, the relatively generous system of social-policy support for the unemployed, the poor, single parents, and the aged, which had been nurtured during the Trudeau years, came under attack by neoconservative budget slashing, but the public's passion for health care convinced politicians to restore those financial cuts. Meanwhile, Trudeau's immensely popular Charter of Rights and Freedoms gave millions of non-British and non-French immigrants a sense of security that theirs was not a second-class citizenship.

Now, differences between Canadian's and American official values grow ever greater. In sharp contrast with the fundamentalist conservatism espoused in the White House, the US Supreme Court, and the Congress, the Canadian government has followed the Canadian Supreme Court's lead by legalizing same-sex marriage and decriminalizing the possession of marijuana. These attitudinal differences between the two countries' mainstreams underpin the continuing debate in Canada over its foreign policy.

The Debate: plus c'est la meme chose

Little has changed in the attitudes of Canadians, who remain anxiously obsessed with how to get along with their one and only neighbour in the face of its sometimes laudable, often destructive behaviour. As they look overseas, they remain worried about their standing in the rest of the world and how best to contribute to resolving its most urgent issues.

Interested academics, along with a limited number of journalists and civic-minded citizens, study how best to understand these problems. The analytical and

normative positions resulting from the resulting analyses continue to fall into two distinct schools of analysis, generating a debate that seems as unresolvable as it is eternal.

Because its global, continental, and domestic context has changed, so have the goalposts for the debate about Canada's foreign policy choices moved. Because the Cold War's demise has relieved Ottawa of the imperative to support the United States on the major issues, the foreign-policy field it faces is considerably broader. But because the WTO and NAFTA have tied one hand behind the government's back and because there are very few economic sectors which remain under Canadian ownership and control, the field is also much shorter. Nevertheless, there are still two main schools of thought, two teams, as it were, which rally their supporters to propound opposing positions.

Continentalists

A century ago, Canadian imperialists expounded the view that the Dominion of Canada's prime goal should be to retain its connection with the British empire in order to guarantee its military security, its economic well-being, and its cultural identity. They reflected the interests of exporters who shipped their produce to Great Britain, importers who shipped consumer goods back across the Atlantic, the banking community which financed this commerce, and intellectuals whose careers depended on nourishing their links with Oxford and Cambridge in the "mother country".

At that time, nationalists, who wanted autonomy from the Empire, looked to the United States as a progressive haven, relations with which could help burnish the Dominion's prospects as a self-sufficient, fast-growing but more autonomous society.

Four decades ago, the pattern had shifted: pro-British imperialists had become pro-American continentalists. Those wanting to extend relations with the United States were the dominant resource and manufacturing corporations for which continental integration promised economic salvation. Continentalists – as my "Choices To Be Made" explained -- admonished Canadians to support US foreign policy right or wrong. As the hearth of freedom in the Cold War, Washington should not be criticized. Furthermore, Canada's influence in the world depended on proving its influence in Washington's corridors of power. Being on the inside there – pulling our weight, being seen as sound – was the precondition for being effective in international forums. Even when we disagreed with Washington, we should not speak our mind lest we risk being punished. Continental integration should be accelerated, since the interdependence of the two economies provided Canada with some insurance against Washington's arbitrary action since, if it tried to punish Canada, the United States would really be harming its own interests.

Since then, the same logic pushed Ottawa to negotiate CUFTA and NAFTA and abandon the previous strategy of developing a self-standing economy.

Now, in the aftermath of September 11, 2001, Canadian continentalists have made the same arguments. Ottawa should support US military policy in Iraq and sign on to National Missile Defense not because these were sensible policies but because Canada might be punished for not toeing the American line. Canada's global influence depended on being seen as insiders in Washington where our advice was heeded. Criticizing American policy would only alienate our US interlocutors and so be self-defeating.

Nationalists

The economic nationalist position has long been ambivalent. While admired for some for its great social, technological, and intellectual achievements, the United States was also seen as a threat to Canadian security. Interdependence really meant a dependence that shut down the possibility for creative action abroad. Rather than practising “quiet diplomacy”, Ottawa should develop a public diplomacy that spoke our mind. This could be valuable itself in buttressing Canadians’ sense of their bilingual and multicultural identity.

Since then, nationalists have been mainly on the losing side of the debate. While they could take some comfort from Pierre Trudeau’s occasional forays on the world scene and from Brian Mulroney’s defiance of both Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan over apartheid in South Africa, they had to mourn their two defeats over free trade and resign themselves to their country’s economic-policy castration and consequently to its ever-closer, but dependent integration in the American system.

Lloyd Axworthy’s surprisingly successful ventures in low-cost niche diplomacy -- the international criminal court and the land mine treaty -- proved their view that public diplomacy could produce effective foreign policy. But the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade had been too drained of funds, personnel, and morale over the years of neoconservative budget-cutting for Axworthy’s muscular, damn-the-torpedoes approach to continue under other leadership.

Now, the nationalists enjoy a clear, if temporary advantage. The Bush Doctrine’s application of unilateral, preemptive war in Iraq has proven such a patent disaster that ready-aye-ready solidarity with George Bush has almost no traction outside the boardrooms of the Canadian Council of Chief Executives. Even the CCCE has been consternated by Washington’s blatant disregard of its NAFTA commitments in defying dispute panel rulings that remanded US countervailing and antidumping duties levied against Canadian softwood lumber exports. Other examples of Washington’s unprincipled protectionism – most glaringly, its prolonged ban on imports of Canadian beef – make continentalist arguments a hard sell. Nevertheless, Canada remains locked into its external constitution as its negotiators intended. Advocates of greater autonomy have few power levers at their command.

In the final analysis, the debate between continentalist and nationalists about Canada’s foreign policy remains just as unresolvable as that between the ideological right and the left in domestic politics. The two schools are rooted in different value systems and support opposing corporate and citizen interests, so that deploying actual evidence has little effect.

Turning to the reforms advocated four decades ago, it is clear that much of what I recommended then has actually been implemented. White papers galore have been written on foreign policy issues. Parliament’s Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Trade has held myriad hearings across the country on the major issues facing Canada and produced substantial reports. Public opinion polls are constantly commissioned in order to take the electorate’s pulse.

As for the mandarinat, the diplomatic elite which kept its foreign policy cards close to its vest, has vanished, its place of dominance over Canadian foreign policy taken by trade policy analysts inspired by an equally exclusive and arrogant ideology. It was the reverse takeover of the old Department of External Affairs in 1982 when the trade commissioners were moved to Sussex Drive from the Department of Industry, Trade &

Commerce which led to Canadian foreign policy being hijacked by a mania for free trade agreements. Similar to the old Ottawa mandarinates in their anti-democratic elitism but inspired by a messianic, economics-based faith in neoconservative market deregulation, they drove out considerations of Canada's national interests as a global power in order to hitch the country to America's destiny.

Now that the United States' destiny seems decidedly less rosy; now that India, Brazil, and even Mexico are moving up the power hierarchy behind China; now that many Canadians have taken the future into their own hands by operating across national borders in non-government organizations that are directly coping with pandemics and rebuilding failed states, the continentalist-nationalist debate has taken on a renewed relevance. If the United States has become a rogue imperial power whose policies exacerbate rather than remediate global warming, expand rather than contain nuclear proliferation, provoke rather than stifle terrorism, and speed rather than slow the spread of HIV/AIDS, there is a powerful argument to "go around" the United States as former Defense Secretary Robert McNamara recently urged the international community.

Many foreign-policy choices have been made over the past four decades, but many still remain to be made day by day and year by year. Given the ineradicably deep gaps separating the normative positions of continentalists and nationalists, what choices Ottawa should make will continue to be debated. Forty years from now, it would be surprising if the debate had been definitively resolved. With luck, students and scholars in the middle of the 21st century will conclude that the choices made in this period contributed to averting the social, economic, and environmental disasters that were facing Canadians and the world back in the century's first decade.