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Canada's Dangerous Obsession with Donald Trump



President Donald Trump in the foreground, with China's Xi Jinping and Russia's Vladimir Putin in the background, set against a Canadian flag (Kevin Lamarque, Maxim Shemetov, Sputnik/Alexander Kazakov/Reuters, NR Illustration)

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April 12, 2026 6:30 AM



A fixation on Trump and American politics is blinding Canada and its allies to the challenges that will define the next quarter century.

THERE is a comfortable orthodoxy settling over editorial boards, university seminars, and policy conferences from Ottawa to Brussels. It goes something like this: Donald Trump broke the international order, the United States is an unreliable partner, and the remedy is diversification — toward China, toward the BRICS bloc of emerging economies (including players like Brazil, Russia, and India), toward anyone who is not Washington. This narrative is not merely incomplete, it is dangerously

wrong, and the countries indulging in it are squandering what little time they have to prepare for a world that is about to change in ways that have nothing to do with who occupies the Oval Office.

Let's begin with the diversification fantasy. Canada in particular has spent considerable political energy signaling that it can meaningfully reduce its economic dependence on the United States. The arithmetic tells a different story. Roughly 75 percent of Canadian exports flow south. The infrastructure — pipelines, rail corridors, and supply chains — is integrated on a north-south axis that took the better part of a century to build. As Michael Hart has argued, the Canadian-American economic relationship is not a policy choice; it is a geographic and structural reality. Talking about diversification may win applause at Davos panels, but it does not build liquified natural gas (LNG) terminals, nor conjure new consumer markets out of thin air.

The second delusion is that China represents a viable alternative anchor for liberal democracies. But Beijing's long-term strategy is now well-documented. The Belt and Road Initiative, the Global Development Initiative, the Global Security Initiative, the Global Civilization Initiative, and the expanding architecture of BRICS are not charitable enterprises. They are institutional instruments designed to construct a parallel international order — one in which sovereignty is defined as regime security, human rights are culturally relative, and the rule of law is subordinate to the rule of party. Elizabeth Economy has argued persuasively that Xi Jinping's China is not joining the existing order; it's seeking to revise it from within and, where necessary, replace it from without. Canada, the European Union, and the broader constellation of democracies benefit enormously from the institutional architecture that emerged after 1945 — open trade adjudication, treaty-based security, and freedom of navigation. To flirt with Beijing as a counterweight to Washington is to saw off the branch on which one is sitting.

Third, and perhaps most corrosive, is the notion that Trump and the United States are the root cause of dysfunction in the international system and at home. China, Russia, Iran, and North Korea have been working to revamp and replace the international system since the end of the Cold War. Rather than being an instigator of the dysfunction, the U.S. has defended the international order.

Blaming the U.S. for socio-economic problems at home is an exercise in scapegoating dressed up as analysis. Canada's productivity crisis did not begin in 2017. The European Union's demographic stagnation, regulatory sclerosis, and energy vulnerability were not created in Mar-a-Lago. Britain's post-Brexit turbulence was a sovereign British decision. The high-quality data — from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, the IMF, the Bank for International Settlements — consistently points to domestic governance failures as the primary drivers of sluggish growth, housing unaffordability, and declining competitiveness across the Western world. As Fareed Zakaria notes in *Foreign Affairs*, the crisis of liberal democracy is largely self-inflicted, a product of decades of deferred structural reform and political systems that reward short-term consumption over long-term investment. Blaming America is easy. Reforming pension systems, rationalizing health-care spending, and liberalizing planning regimes are all hard. Democracies are choosing the easy path, and it leads nowhere useful.

There is also an uncomfortable illiberal undercurrent in fashionable anti-Americanism that deserves scrutiny. The United States, for all its polarization and dysfunction, remains the society in which citizens can write, speak, protest, and publish virtually without restraint. Can the same be said of the alternatives on offer? Can it be said of Beijing, where a single social media post can result in detention? Of Moscow, where independent

journalism is functionally extinct? The reflex to equate American imperfection with villainy betrays a moral confusion that would be laughable if its consequences were not so serious.

Now consider what is actually coming. Over the next five to ten years, the world will be entering a period of simultaneous leadership transitions in the four most consequential states outside Europe, and almost no one in the policy establishment is adequately preparing for it.

The United States will eventually move beyond Trump. But what will replace MAGA? The movement has restructured the Republican Party's coalition around economic nationalism, skepticism of alliance commitments, and a transactional view of trade. That ideological infrastructure will not vanish with one man. As Walter Russell Mead has written, Jacksonian nationalism is not an aberration in American political culture, but a deep current. Allies who are simply waiting for Trump to leave are waiting for a restoration that is unlikely to arrive in the form they imagine.

China faces an even more consequential transition. Xi Jinping has systematically eliminated rivals, abolished term limits, and concentrated power to a degree unseen since Mao. History suggests — and scholars like Jude Blanchette have detailed — that when a paramount leader of Xi's type exits the scene, China turns inward. Succession struggles consume political oxygen. Factional competition paralyzes decision-making. The interregnum enduring bipolarity could last years. How the world manages a distracted, unstable, nuclear-armed China with the world's second-largest economy is a question of the first order. It is receiving attention of the third order.

Russia after Putin is unlikely to be a moderated Russia. The institutional bench behind Putin is populated not by liberals, but by security-state hardliners and ultranationalists who view the current regime as insufficiently aggressive. As Andrea Kendall-Taylor and Erica Frantz have argued, personalist autocracies rarely transition to moderation; they transition to chaos or to something harder. A post-Putin Russia armed with 6,000 nuclear warheads and led by someone to Putin's right is a scenario that demands preparation now.

India, too, is in flux. Narendra Modi's vision of a Hindu-majoritarian state that asserts civilizational confidence on the global stage has transformed Indian domestic politics. When Modi eventually leaves office, the question is not whether Hindu nationalism endures, but what form it takes and how a more assertive India interacts with an Indo-Pacific already strained by Sino-American competition. This is a first-tier strategic question for every democracy with interests east of Suez.

Layered on top of all this are structural disruptions that respect no political calendar: the coming tsunami of artificial intelligence displacing white-collar labor at a scale and speed for which no government has a credible plan; birth rates across the developed world falling below replacement and, increasingly, across the developing world; aging populations consuming ever-larger shares of national budgets; and the uneven but accelerating impacts of climate change on agriculture, migration, and state stability.

These are the issues that will define the next 25 years. Not Trump's tariffs. Not the latest inflammatory social media post from Washington. Not the satisfying but ultimately sterile exercise of anti-American virtue signaling.

When you engage exclusively with a certain demographic of media commentator, academic, or policy analyst — the kind who populate panels and podcasts with a reliably rewarded anti-Trump lens — you receive answers that reinforce your priors. Confirmation bias is not a strategy. It's a sedative. And countries that are sedated while the world transforms around them do not get second chances.

Canada and its allies need to do something deeply unfashionable: Stop staring at Washington and start staring in the mirror. The big picture is not about Donald Trump. It never was.

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