New foreign policy may grow out of Canada's COVID-19 crisis

Canada not only needs to develop a new realistic approach to China, but also towards the U.S. Neither country can be counted upon to have Canada's back in times of crisis.

There seem to be at least two venues for the fight against COVID-19. One COVID-19 war is in the hospitals and their intensive care units. The other is being fought by political leaders to ensure sufficient personal protective equipment (PPE) is available to the health-care front lines.

This is the part of the war that Deputy Prime Minister Chrystia Freeland has described as the "wild west," because of a global scramble to acquire PPE.

As Prime Minister Justin Trudeau duly noted, "this continues to be an ongoing problem—specifically with the United States."

The happy ending, at least for now, was that 3M, the company at the centre of the PPE controversy, sparked when U.S. President Donald Trump invoked the Korean War-era Defense Production Act, and announced a deal that would protect the sending of respirator masks to Canada and Latin America.

The company said "the administration is committed to working to address and remove export and regulatory restrictions to enable this plan."

The plan will enable 3M to continue sending U.S.-made PPE to Canada and Latin America—3M is the primary source of supply for both.

This action by Trump was reminiscent of his mercurial actions during the NAFTA 2.0 negotiations. There, we witnessed name calling, the U.S. working with Mexico to the exclusion of Canada, and the placement of tariffs on aluminum and steel imported from Canada, plus a threat to impose tariffs on autos and auto parts from Canada.

Trumps has mastered the black art of tariff weaponization. So it is not a stretch to see him working once again against the interests of Canada, supposedly America's closest ally. 

Trudeau is using the negotiating approach he used during the NAFTA discussions and is working at numerous levels to prevent this. The Trudeau approach to dealing with Trump may be frustrating for those who advocate retaliation while the PM says things like "I don't think it's a good thing to harm your neighbour to succeed. That's why we will work together to resolve it without a difference between friends."

In the end it may be Ontario Premier Doug Ford who has the most appropriate solution: never again be dependent on sources outside Canada for the supply of medical equipment.

Another factor Canada should take into consideration as it moves beyond COVID-19 is that the U.S. has abandoned its position of leadership in times of crisis. As National Post columnist John Ivison noted: "Trump's abandonment of responsibility means when this is all over, 100 countries will think better of China and worse of the U.S.—including, maybe, Canada."

The U.S. approach to PPE drove Canada into the waiting arms of China, which has given this country millions of masks—so much so that Ottawa needed to rent a warehouse in China to house them before delivery.

The U.S. played a leadership role in the G20 during the recession of 2008-09. It now plays a minor role in the G20 and G7 response to COVID-19 and there is a power vacuum or abdication of leadership, China is there to insert itself.

More than at any time since the 2016 election, Trump seems intent on making the U.S. smaller in its world view instead of reaching out to help, taking charge in a leadership role in a time of world-wide crisis.

This presents Canada with an interesting dilemma as policy makers look beyond COVID-19.

Should Trump get re-elected in November—something increasingly likely—Canada would be closest witness to the end of Pax Americana. Because of the deep connections between the two countries, Canada is really not in a position to strike out looking for a new best friend, especially if the choice is China.

What Canada may do, as it re-evaluates foreign policy in the post-COVID-19 world, is look for a number of friends with whom Canada shares trading and other interests. Canada not only needs to develop a new realistic approach to China, but also towards the U.S. Neither country can be counted upon to have Canada's back in times of crisis.

A necessary new approach to Canadian foreign policy may be one of the positives that emerge from battling COVID-19. Difficult as that will be.

Bruce Carson has been a senior aide to three prime ministers, Stephen Harper, Brian Mulroney and Joe Clark.