

Opinion: How Canada can improve security if American democracy collapses

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Trump supporters gather outside the Capitol building in Washington, D.C., before breaking in on Jan. 6. Photo by Tayfun Coskun/Anadolu Agency via Getty Images

By Michael Den Tandt and Wesley Wark

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On the anniversary of the January 6 insurrection in Washington DC and as Congressional mid-terms draw nigh, the drumbeat of anxiety grows louder. In the past week The Globe and Mail, the Guardian, Maclean's and CBC have all offered analysis sending similar signals, from different vantage points: The world's greatest democracy has not recovered well from its near-death experience a year ago. If anything, matters now are worse than ever.

The worst case, which is by no means inevitable, looks like this: Donald Trump gains advantage through Congressional proxies in 2022 and is returned to the White House as president in 2024, either at the ballot box or by gerrymandering. Then, aided by fellow travellers in the Republican Party, Congress, the media and perhaps even the military, and unrestrained by the checks and balances in place from 2016 to 2020, he ends American democracy as we have known it and imposes a new form of American authoritarianism.

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This is a nightmare that could confront the United States. Equally worrying, for Canadians, is the seeming paucity of options as we consider possible future seismic political changes south of the border.

One recent commentator has suggested Canada [needs](#) a new Parliamentary committee on the future of the United States. Even Ottawa insiders would find this lacking. Surely it can't represent the best we can do in the face of such a potential crisis? Others urge increased defence spending, well in excess of the 1.4 per cent of GDP to which Canada is headed. The current climate for such spending, given the financial burdens of dealing with the continuing pandemic, are hardly optimal. Nor have we achieved any clarity about how more defence dollars and speeded up military procurement would

actually address the frightening prospect of the end of U.S. democracy.

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The hard answer is that even a strengthened and modernized Canadian military would not and could not protect Canada against any future U.S. threats of force, should such a far-fetched eventuality ever come to pass. Instead, a stronger military would be one pillar in a more robust Canadian security posture — providing much greater self-sufficiency in our own neighbourhood.

Simply put, Canada needs a military that can shield this country from unwanted intrusions by the United States, in critical areas where it may feel Canada is not pulling its weight — think Arctic security; early warning systems crucial to the maintenance of NORAD; defence and deterrence against foreign espionage and interference; and adversarial relations with China.

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But a military instrument would be just one subsidiary component of the capabilities Canada needs to confront a very uncertain future. The Centre for International Governance Innovation has mounted an ambitious project to study this country's new national security needs from multiple perspectives. The project's core message is that the federal government and all Canadians need to take national security much more seriously. A starting point should be the creation of a new national security strategy that addresses Canada's future needs and is honest about facing the challenges presented by a rapidly changing geopolitical environment, in which the retreat from democracy is one important facet.

National Security is not just about dealing with today's crises but thinking

about tomorrow's. The Canadian government has limited capacity to affect what happens politically in the United States. What it can and must do is prepare, including for the worst, should the United States become unrecognizable, or an unreliable ally after a century-long security partnership.

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There are six keys:

1. Strengthening our critical analysis of U.S. developments using every tool, including intelligence reporting and alliance relationships, available to the Canadian government;
2. Addressing critical military deficiencies, especially to "defend against help;"
3. Building sustained relationships and engagement with all democratic forces in the United States, while avoiding charges of interference in U.S. domestic affairs.
4. Adjusting immigration policies to meet Canadian needs, even where this may conflict with Canada-U.S. relations or existing instruments such as the safe third country agreement;
5. Building a more secure and diversified Canadian economic base;
6. Reinforcing a sense of the uniqueness of the Canadian political project, distinct from the United States.

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All would be challenging in our present circumstances, in which political

attention to geopolitics has been so ground down by domestic imperatives around COVID-19. Reimagining a strong, unique sense of Canadian identity may be the greatest challenge of all — and the most necessary answer to any future American descent into authoritarianism.

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