

Commentary

Would you risk your life for your career?

The new global era is different from the Cold War period. But there are still lessons to be drawn, especially for globetrotting professionals



by James Fleck

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Canadians who came of age during the past 30 years probably find the multipolar world that is forming around us to be disorienting. But for those of us who are a little more seasoned, this period feels a little like Back to the Future all over again.

This new global environment is certainly different from the Cold War that ended with the collapse of the Iron Curtain in the early 1990s. But there are some relevant lessons to be taken from that era. These lessons are particularly important for people engaged in global business, but also for any Canadian venturing out into the world as a tourist.

Before the Berlin Wall fell on November 9, 1989, we took great care when traveling behind the Iron Curtain. During that era, I took several trips across this boundary as part of General Electric’s international operations.

On different occasions, I found myself enticed by so-called honeypot operations, where beautiful women tried to entice me into compromising situations. I was temporarily detained by malicious border guards. And, in one unforgettable excursion, I was stranded in the Soviet Republic of Kyrgyzstan at the moment the Soviet Union collapsed. I am still amazed that this imperial implosion occurred without more mayhem and death, although it certainly caused some anxiety for those of us experiencing it firsthand.

We never explicitly asked ourselves whether we were willing to die for our careers, but we certainly knew that the work we were doing carried some real risks. Why did we do it? In my case, I was highly motivated by a sense of pride in expanding global markets for products such as hydropower equipment manufactured in Canada. And, yes, it was exciting and we were well paid.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, historian Francis Fukuyama wrote in *The End of History* that the world would continue to triangulate toward a rules-based liberal democratic consensus. It did for a while, but in recent years the pendulum has swung back with a vengeance.

As China’s detention of the two Michaels demonstrated, arbitrary detention and the risk of getting caught in the crossfire of geopolitical disputes need to be real considerations for globetrotting Canadians.

Recent [disclosures](#) in the case of the two Michaels might create some doubt about the level of danger faced by “normal” travelers. But other actions by the Chinese government, such as the revoking of exit permits for foreign professionals engaged in corporate due diligence, certainly raise eyebrows. When due diligence becomes espionage, it is hard to say what activities might still be safe. [Hostage diplomacy](#) is alive and well in many different regimes around the world.

Canadian organizations need to address these new risks as they structure their international operations and career opportunities. Employees engaged in risky, foreign endeavours must know that their own corporate leadership, and government, will go to the mat for them.

Unfortunately, if the Canadian government is required to intervene, it will not be enough. In my career, I had much more faith in GE, not to mention the US State Department, to get me out of trouble. The few times I asked Canada for help, the response was not very impactful. This is not surprising, as our influence as a middle power was marginal during the Cold War and, for myriad reasons, has declined further in the intervening years.

Faced with this reality, Canadian businesses eyeing global markets have a few options. Some might decide that the risks are too great and so limit their international ambitions to select “safe” markets.

Some might decide to mitigate risk, and split the opportunities by partnering with international companies, distributors or agents.

Or some brave souls might decide to roll the dice and go it alone. In this case, these organizations need to rethink who they recruit and how they treat these pioneers. There needs to be honest discussions about risk, support and compensation.

Working in a comfortable Canadian office, or maybe from your own home, is objectively easier than being on the ground in a volatile, authoritarian country. People stepping up to suffer the hardships and take personal risk must be rewarded in terms of career opportunities and compensation.

The new reality of a turbulent world requires Canadian businesses to rethink global strategies and organizational structures. It is not an exaggeration to ask yourself if you would risk your life for your career.

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