A TRUMP'S EYE VIEW OF CANADA

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Donald Trump has made various statements about Canada, beginning on November 25, 2024, when he first announced his intent to impose a 25-per-cent tariff on all Canadian goods entering the United States. His justifications for these tariffs have shifted: at times, he frames them as a bargaining tool to force Canada into discussions on border security, immigration and drug smuggling; at others, he cites the American bilateral trade deficit with Canada, the need to accelerate the scheduled 2026 review of the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA), or even as leverage to pressure Canada into meeting NATO's two-per-cent-of-GDP defence spending target. Most provocatively, he has called for the United States to annex Canada and admit it as a single state. Analyzing Trump's rhetoric is challenging, as it often appears to be the erratic outbursts of a social media-savvy demagogue. However, beneath the bluster, elements of a broader view of Canada emerge.

Border security, the drug trade, trade imbalances, and military spending are longstanding issues in U.S.-Canada relations. The two nations routinely engage in diplomatic consultations on these topics, and a simple U.S. request for talks would likely have sufficed to bring Canada to the table. The policies Trump demands of Canada are not inherently unreasonable in a different context, and Canadian commentators often acknowledge that addressing these matters aligns with Canada's national interest irrespective of American pressure. However, Trump's approach is characterized by his signature petulance, a negotiation style reminiscent of Nixon's "madman theory" – the idea that projecting irrationality can be an effective diplomatic strategy.

But does Trump's rhetoric reveal a deeper perspective on Canada, and if so, will it translate into policy over the next four years? His statements on Canada must be understood alongside his past remarks

about purchasing Greenland from Denmark and reestablishing American control over the Panama Canal Zone by force. This worldview echoes the Gilded Age, particularly the presidency of William McKinley, when the United States raised tariffs and used the Spanish-American War to annex Cuba, Puerto Rico and the Philippines. This period of expansionism was rooted in Manifest Destiny – the belief that U.S. territorial growth was inevitable and justified. The idea of acquiring Canada was a recurring theme in American political discourse from the American Revolution through the aftermath of the Civil War, influencing the formation of the Dominion of Canada in 1867 as a defensive measure against U.S. annexationist ambitions. As late as 1911, U.S. House Speaker Champ Clark argued that a U.S. – Canada reciprocity agreement was the first step toward annexation – an assertion that likely contributed to the agreement's failure, helping Robert Borden's Conservatives win that year's Canadian federal election.

Annexationist rhetoric was historically more common among American conservatives, whose nationalism had an expansionist bent. Canadian conservatives of the time, in contrast, were staunch monarchists who valued Canada's place in the British Empire and were therefore wary of American republicanism. However, a faction of free-market liberals argued that economic realities favored North American integration. The most famous articulation of this view came from historian Goldwin Smith in his 1891 book, *Canada and the Canadian Question*. Smith contended that Canada lacked a sustainable economic foundation as an independent nation, arguing that its economic structure had a north-south orientation better suited to integration with the United States. He also dismissed Canada's linguistic duality as untenable, predicting the assimilation of French Canadians. For Smith, Canadian sovereignty was an artificial construct propped up by British colonial ties, and annexation would free Canada from London's geopolitical constraints.

It is unclear how much direct knowledge of Canada exists within Trump's inner circle or who informs their perspective on Canadian affairs. There are documented connections between Trumpists and elements of Canada's far-right, as seen during the 2022 Freedom Convoy protests and trucker occupation of downtown Ottawa. There was also an evident antagonism between Trump and former Liberal prime minister Justin Trudeau, fueled by their clash at the 2018 G7 Summit and broader ideological differences between Trumpian conservatism and the Canadian liberal elite's "Laurentian Consensus." However, Trump and his advisors have demonstrated an acute understanding of which button to press to unsettle Canadian political discourse. It is as though someone at Mar-a-Lago had studied Margaret Atwood's *Survival: A Thematic Guide to Canadian Literature*, in which she observed, "Canadians are forever taking the national pulse like doctors at a sickbed; the aim is not to see whether the patient will live well but simply whether he will live at all." They may also have come across Richard Rohmer's 1970s novels *Ultimatum and Exxoneration*, which depict U.S. attempts to dominate and annex Canada, and recognized the psychological fault lines they were probing.

So far, Trump has refrained from directly exploiting Canada's most sensitive political issue: national unity. His closest allies in Canada are conservative provincial leaders in Saskatchewan and Alberta,

provinces whose economic ties to the United States rival those with the rest of Canada. Alberta Premier Danielle Smith met with Trump at Mar-a-Lago before his inauguration and reportedly sought assurances that Alberta would receive more favorable treatment under his tariff policy. Trump obliged by keeping tariffs on Canadian energy at 10 per cent instead of 25. Yet he could have gone further – had he exempted Alberta oil entirely, he might have baited Ottawa into imposing an export tax that would have inflamed national unity tensions. Likewise, Trump has avoided engaging with Quebec, despite its unique status within Canada. Only recently did right-wing Quebec nationalist Mathieu Bock-Côté argue that Quebec should pursue independence – an outcome he already supports unconditionally – if the United States annexed Canada. Thus far, no one in Trump's camp has attempted to court the Parti Québécois, despite its current polling strength and its pledge to hold a third sovereignty referendum if it wins the 2026 Quebec election.

The resignation of Justin Trudeau and the rise of Mark Carney as his successor as prime minister – a status confirmed in Canada's late-April 2025 federal election – have added a new dynamic to this equation. Carney's polling strength stemmed in part from the perception that he is well-equipped to handle Trump's aggressive trade and foreign policy maneuvers. His background in finance and central banking positions him as a leader who can navigate the economic turbulence that a second Trump presidency may bring. Carney's victory in the Trump-centered election campaign underscores how deeply Canadians are attuned to the potential disruptions emanating from Washington.

Trump's invocation of annexation may seem surprising, but it is not without historical precedent. It is merely another facet of his broader nostalgia for late 19th-century American politics. While unlikely to materialize as a concrete policy, his rhetoric has the potential to continue to disrupt Canadian politics, particularly if he chooses to stoke regional tensions in Alberta or Quebec. The extent of this destabilization will depend on how, and whether, Trump weaponizes his expansionist rhetoric in the years ahead.

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