Back to the Future? Implications of the Trump Administration's "Bad Neighbor Policy" for North American (and possibly Transatlantic) Security and Defence

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In early May 2025, former US President Joe Biden resurfaced from a lengthy period of public absence to deliver some pointed remarks about Donald Trump, his immediate predecessor as well as successor at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue. Biden chose as his vehicle for re-entering the public arena BBC Radio Four's program, "Today," hosted by Nick Robinson. In a lengthy interview with the host, Biden ranged across a number of Trump-related topics, including the one upon which this article focuses: North American security. Commenting critically on some of the current president's not-so-veiled threats to change the territorial status quo on a continent extending from the High Arctic to the Panama Canal that separates North from South America, Biden lashed out at Trump

for promising to bring the Canal Zone back under American sovereign control, as well as for reiterating his desire to annex Greenland and announcing that he coveted an additional acquisition, neighbouring Canada, widely regarded as America's "best friend" on the world stage.

"What the hell's going on here?" charged Biden. "What president ever talks like that? That's not who we are. We're about freedom, democracy, opportunity, not about confiscation" (Zurcher A., 2025). Biden was no doubt correct in noting that annexation—and of Canada, no less!—was not exactly what the average American has at the top of their mind these days, especially in light of the long-time trend in public-opinion surveys typically revealing Canada to be the favourite foreign country of Americans (though on occasion it comes in a close second behind Australia).

Yet, the former president's ascription of annexation musings as being patently beneath the dignity of the office was a distortion of the historical record, for there clearly had been other occupants of the White House who imagined that adding Canada to the Republic, whether by hook or crook, would be a smart thing to do, with some of them even trying energetically to accomplish the feat (see Stéphane Paquin's article in this volume). And while the list of those presidential annexationists is not a terribly long one, some notable names do make an appearance on it, including those of Thomas Jefferson (1801-1809), James Madison (1809-1817), and James Knox Polk (1845-1849). Added to this list could be at least two other chief executives who might not have manifested their acquisitive urge as directly as the above trio, but who nevertheless did seem to desire *Anschluss* with Canada: Ulysses S. Grant (1869-1977) and Benjamin Harrison (1889-1893) (Callahan J. M., 1937; Warner D. F., 1960; Granatstein J. L. and N. Hillmer, 1994).

But if Biden was wrong to intimate that no president other than Trump had ever shown himself to be a devotee of confiscation, he was correct to point out, if only implicitly, the anachronistic nature of the current president's musings. It has been a very long time since the United States has had someone in the White House who is apparently disturbed by Canada's remaining politically separate from the US. This is why annexation talk emanating from the White House seems so very "retro," not the kind of thing that any self-respecting (or at least, normal) president would have been caught dead uttering at any time since the late 19th century. Similarly, it has been many decades since there has been a president so willing to return the Canada-US security and defence relationship to the "bad-neighbourly" status it had once so regularly had, during most of the period between 1783 (the year America formally gained independence) and the close of the 19th century—a span of time when wary Canadians were accustomed to sleeping with one eye open for fear that their southern neighbour might commit aggression against them.

While the US certainly had an impressive expansionist record during its first century and a half as an independent country—often achieved at the expense of Indigenous peoples or Latin Americans, and mightily assisted by advantageous land sales made by France (Louisiana in 1803) and Russia (Alaska in 1867)—by the first quarter of the twentieth century, a paradigm shift was well underway

in Washington. Starting with the administration of William Howard Taft (1909-1913), and gathering steam through those of Calvin Coolidge (1923-1929) and Herbert Hoover (1929-1933) before becoming vastly accentuated during Franklin D. Roosevelt's first eight years in office, when a new watchword emerged, the "good neighbor policy" (Haglund D. G., 1984). It is a watchword that, shockingly to Canadians, the Trump administration seems to have jettisoned, in favour of a return to the old, bad-neighbourly behaviour that had so characterized the long era when many Americans dreamed of a "manifest destiny" to expand their country's influence and territory, starting in the Western hemisphere, and then—who could say?—extending to other regions of the world (Weinberg A. K., 1935).

Although one typically associates the Good Neighbor Policy explicitly with the Latin American republics (Herring H., 1941), over time it would be Canada and the US that best operationalized the expectations associated with the rubric. So much was this the case, that it was not unreasonable for observers to suggest that among the universe of US "special relationships" with other countries, the Canada-US relationship stood out as being the most special of them all (Abelson D. E. and S. Brooks, 2024). In the realm of security and defence, there were three reasons for regarding the Canadian-American relationship as the global platinum standard for neighbourly comportment. The first of these consisted in the durability of the two countries' security community, by which term is meant that member-states neither use nor threaten to use force in the resolution of the disputes that they routinely have with each other. Tariffs *per se* do not negate a security community, for the Canada-US security community is widely conceded to have come into existence sometime between the late 19th century and early 20th century—years during which both Canada and the US maintained protectionist barriers against each other (Roussel S., 2004; Patsias C. and D. Deschênes, 2011). Although scholars continue to debate *exactly* when the security community became established, it is fair to say that it is the West's longest unbroken such community.

The second notable security-related attribute concerns the two countries' alliance ties. Again, what is significant is the span of time during which their military alliance has remained continuously in existence, from its birth in August 1940 down to the present. While France was independent United States' first ally, and thus remains in a sense its "oldest" one, what is usually forgotten by those who traffic in the "old-ally" trope is that the Franco-American alliance of 1778 ended in 1800 with the Treaty of Mortefontaine. It would not be until 1917 that the two countries would again be allied, albeit only briefly, and it was not until 1949 that they entered into what may or may not be an enduring alliance, NATO.

The third "special" attribute of Canadian-American security ties is their shared responsibility for the defence of the North American continent. This responsibility is founded upon a normative expectation: each understands it has an indefeasible obligation not to do anything that would jeopardize the physical security interests of the other. This norm was established two years prior

to the birth of the bilateral alliance, and takes the name "Kingston dispensation" because it was at Queen's University in August 1938 that Franklin D. Roosevelt signalled for the first time ever a U.S. self-imposed duty to backstop Canadian physical security, should the country be attacked by a foreign power. Prime Minister Mackenzie King made a related pledge a few days later (though in a different Ontario town, Woodbridge), when he said Canada would not consciously do anything that would imperil US security interests (Haglund D. G., 2023).

For these three reasons, and quite apart from the myriad of economic and other bilateral ties discussed elsewhere in this section of the journal, there was indeed good reason for analysts to stress the singular qualities of the Canada-US security and defence relationship. Notwithstanding the "platinum-standard" status of the relationship, Donald Trump appears to have seen fit to take Canada-US relations back to a less pleasant era. The question that everyone in Canada (and elsewhere) must ask themselves, is *Why?* What possible motive(s) might the president have in jeopardizing what had once been healthy ties?

Several answers can be adduced. Let us divide those explanations into two categories: irrational and rational ones. Without prejudging whether Enlightenment-era reasoning underlies the president's motives, it must be said that it is not altogether out of the question that psychological or neurological malfunctioning on the part of any president can and does play a large role in his decision-making. There is a significant literature in the US that attests to how psychological disturbances might impede sound executive action—with the proof of this particular pudding being the debate over the impact of cognitive distortions upon one chief executive in particular, Woodrow Wilson (1913-1921). Nor would the problem of political ED (for executive dysfunction) be unknown to students of French presidential politics; indeed, we might even label this phenomenon the "Paul Deschanel syndrome," after the tenth president of the Third Republic, who was forced to step down in September 1920 for reasons of cognitive debilitation, a mere seven months into his *septennat*.

But let us assume that Donald Trump really is more of a product of the Enlightenment than he pretends to be. Let us take his decision-making as representing not derangement, but rather the kind of "craziness" typical of the fox—a seemingly inexplicable cunningness that actually is based upon shrewd cost-benefit (thus, "rational") action. Adopting such a rational lens, we might examine Trump's policy toward Canada, in respect not just of annexation but also of tariffs, as being predicated on a set of more or less rational desiderata, taken either singly or in combination.

First, he has said that tariff is his favourite word, and in his second administration has made of William McKinley (1897-1901) what Andrew Jackson (1829-1837) had been for him during his first administration—the symbolic representation of presidential aspiration. Tariffs can generate revenue as well as provide protection. Given the large share of the US total trade conducted with Canada, the presumed benefits of tariffs are vast. Second, he has claimed that tariffs on Canadian

products would cause Ottawa to "get serious" about restricting the southward flow of fentanyl and clandestine immigration into the US (although Canada is only a bit player in both of these). Third, it has been maintained that tariffs on Canada are intended to force Ottawa to spend more on defence (the country currently allocates only 1.47 percent of GDP to defence). Fourth, despite his extolling of McKinley, he actually acts more like Benjamin Harrison (1889-1893), seeking to use economic statecraft in a bid to weaken the Canadian economy and thus bring about annexation. And fifth, it has been even asserted that he is taking a page out of Voltaire's *Candide*, mistreating Canada "pour encourager les autres"—the logic here being that if he is willing to disrupt the US' *best* bilateral relationship, then the other allies, the ones who do not belong to the platinum-standard category, should have even more reason to worry about what might be in store for them unless they adjust their policies in a manner pleasing to the president.

To say again, with this president, one can never be sure if he is crazy or merely crazy like the fox. Assuming the latter to be the case, what security and defence consequences might we expect to see from Trump's approach to Canada? The absolute worst case would be the "reverse Sinatra" outcome, the dissolution of alliance ties, not just with Canada but also with the European states—on the basis that "if you *can't* make it there (i.e., with Canada), you can't make it anywhere."[1]

At the opposite extreme is the best-case scenario, for Canada and by extension, the other allies. The current Trump-engendered strains in the bilateral alliance resulting from his annexation bluster and tariff actions could end up serving as a "therapeutic crisis," similar in consequence to a famous crisis in US-UK relations back in 1895—when a dispute between the two countries over the boundary between Venezuela and British Guiana nearly plunged them into a ruinous war, and in so doing brought policymakers in both countries to their senses, putting them on the path to a "great rapprochement" that would usher in the Anglo-American special relationship (Bertram M., 1992).

In between these polar extremes, one midrange consequence looms as definitely being in the near-term picture. President Trump may not succeed in his project to make America "great" again—whether because it is already great, or simply incapable of ever being made so—but it certainly looks as if he has made Canada "European" again, by inclining Ottawa once more to seek counterweight gains through enhanced cooperation with both the UK and France, its mother countries of old.

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[1] The reference here is to Frank Sinatra's song, "New York, New York," where the singer lets it be known that if he can make it there (i.e., in the Big Apple), he can make it anywhere.

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