You Had a Friend in Me: Canada's Ontological Insecurity under Trump

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Abstract: *Both the tariff threats and '51st state' remarks made by President Donald Trump against Canada in the early weeks of his second presidency led to a nadir in Canada-US relations not seen in over a generation. More than just a dispute over trade, this paper argues that tariffs and annexation rhetoric produced a moment of ontological insecurity in Canada: Canadian political leaders and public alike have been forced to grapple with baseline assumptions of Canada's self-conception as the best friend and most trusted ally of the United States. This ontological insecurity has, in turn, led to changes in Canadian strategic thinking, as elites (re)articulate new narratives of Canadian identity to make sense of the changing social environment. While it remains too early to determine the long-term implications of the tariff threats and annexation rhetoric on Canadian foreign policy, this case presents an interesting empirical development for applying ontological security analysis to better understand the social dimension of international disputes.*

In early December 2024, President-re-elect Donald Trump joked to Prime Minister Justin Trudeau at a dinner in Mar-a-Lago that Canada should become America's 51st state. Though the remark was initially described as a joke, even by Canadian dignitaries, Trump's first weeks in office saw an unprecedented change in American policy and rhetoric vis-a-vis Canada. President Trump threatened, and later imposed, tariffs on Canadian goods while referring to former Prime Minister Trudeau as a 'Governor' while repeatedly asserting his expansionist visions for Canada. The Canadian response to these tariff and annexation threats was a mix of outrage, fear, and an outpouring of patriotism with a distinctly anti-American flavour.

What has been striking in the Canadian response is the deeply personal nature of the conflict. The Canada-US relationship runs much deeper than the economic interdependence and joint free market between the two nations. They share the world's longest unprotected border, share military intelligence, and jointly monitor continental air defence.[1] They share sports leagues, power grids, and are each other's primary source of international visitors.[2] They have a long history of cooperation on transboundary environmental issues and international security.[3] After 9/11, more than 40,000 Canadians served in the US-led Afghanistan War, during which 158 Canadian soldiers were killed. The tariffs and annexation threats in Trump's first weeks are therefore not just a dispute about industrial policy. In the eyes of many Canadians, it was a betrayal by one's best

friend or family member.[4]

This paper explores the rapid deterioration in Canada-US relations in the first months of Trump's second presidency through the paradigm of ontological security studies. It first asks whether the tariffs and annexation threats gave rise to a moment of ontological insecurity in Canada. Having argued that Canada did indeed experience a period of ontological insecurity, the paper then considers how that insecurity will affect Canada's predominant strategic cultures – Atlanticism, Continentalism, and Commonwealth Imperialism – to examine the long-term strategic implications for Canada's foreign policy.

Ontological security is a well-established subdiscipline of international relations that makes an analogy between the self and the state: just as individuals seek a stable sense of self embedded in predictable relationships, so too do states seek a stable identity which is reinforced through social practice. Moments of ontological insecurity for an individual trigger significant internal distress, which causes the individual to question their assumptions about who they are and whom to trust. This unease pushes them to search for different identity narratives to make sense of their new reality. For a state, this means a search for, or rediscovery of, new identities, historical frames, and trust conceptions with which to view international politics. The empirical development of Canada-US relations offers a new case to examine the implications of ontological insecurity for narratives and threat perceptions.

Following a brief literature review of ontological security studies and overview of Canada-US relations, the substantive analysis will proceed in two parts: an initial survey of Canadian attitudes amidst President Trump's annexation and tariff threats, which reveals the sharp rise in anti-American sentiment and deeply personal nature of the dispute, followed by a more focused discourse analysis of how Canadian public figures produced, and at times resurrected, new national autobiographical narratives and adjusted threat perceptions to meet the moment.

These elite-level narratives and foreign policy perceptions do not come from nowhere; recent strategic culture scholarship suggests that countries exhibit multiple strategic subcultures, each with its own historical narratives and self-conceptions. I will examine, therefore, how the Trump tariff and annexation ontological security shock influenced each of Canada's traditional strategic subcultures in different ways. While there is no consensus among strategic culture scholars on the exact typology of strategic subcultures in Canada, this paper follows Massie & Vucetic's classification of Atlanticist, Continentalist, and Commonwealth Imperialist strategic subcultures which have all shaped Canadian defence strategy and practice over the country's history. The paper will also consider the longer-term implications of ontological insecurity on Canada's strategic direction. Although the future trajectory of Canadian foreign policy remains too early to discern, the discursive evidence confirms that ontological insecurity is indeed a salient factor for shaping the narratives and threat perceptions for strategic subcultures.

Review of the ontological (in)security literature

One of the many subfields of international relations scholarship to emerge amidst the cultural turn of the late 1990s and early 2000s is that of ontological security. The need for ontological security is 'extrapolated from the individual level': individuals require a stable sense of self, since a consistent identity brings order to one's world and fosters cognitive and behavioural certainty.[5] This builds on the work of sociologist Anthony Giddens' *The Constitution of Society*, in which he argued that certainty in the routines and practices of daily life produces expectations which help us to secure ourselves as social beings.[6] Jennifer Mitzen was one of the first to propose that states, like individuals, 'engage in ontological security-seeking' by 'minimising hard uncertainty and imposing cognitive order on the environment.' This is done by developing a basic trust system, which simplifies reality for states by taking the most dangerous or threatening questions off the table.[7] This state of ontological security through stable expectations of daily life is sustained through routinised behaviours and social relationships with significant others.[8]

While Mitzen's seminal article focused on stable expectations of daily life, Steele argues that 'states seek ontological security because they want to maintain consistent self-concepts', which affirm how a state sees itself. These self-conceptions are 'constituted and maintained through a narrative which gives life to routinised foreign policy actions.'[9] Narratives are the 'stories by means of which self-identity is reflexively understood' and give meaning to a state's past and imagined future.[10] These narratives need not be a record of everything that has ever happened in a state's history, but rather they focus on highlights and experiences which matter most. The interactive international environment can impact a state's sense of self and bring its narratives in question, which produces ontological insecurity and creates demands for a new draft of the state's narrative.[11]

Like good health or a strong internet connection, the need for ontological security is most evident once it's gone. Giddens defined these critical situations as a 'set of circumstances which, for whatever reason, radically disrupt accustomed routines of daily life.'[12] Subotić's work on ontological insecurity in international relations examines how in periods of threat and uncertainty, narratives are 'selectively activated to provide a cognitive bridge between policy change while also preserving ontological security through providing autobiographical continuity.'[13] Elites do so by linking necessary policy changes with particular roles or historical memories which are familiar to their audiences. New narratives don't come out of nowhere – they are consciously activated or deactivated by political actors to preserve the broader ontological security narrative. Subotić cites the example of Serbian foreign policy vis-a-vis Kosovo and its tacit acceptance of Kosovo's government in 2013 despite Serbia's longstanding self-image of Kosovo as its 'Jerusalem' dating back to the Battle of Kosovo in 1389. Subotić finds how Serbia activated the 'sacrificial' part of this national story while de-emphasising the 'imminent return' implication.

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine represented a significant ontological security shock for Europe.[14] Chancellor Olaf Schulz went so far as to call it a *'Zeitenwende'* or

historic turning point. Della Sala articulates that the return of inter-state war shook the EU's foundational myth and noble narrative – that it was born from the ashes of World War II and the recognition that nationalism and war should be replaced with closer cooperation and peaceful relations.[15] Integration was the process for creating a new international order based on peace and stability, not fear and uncertainty. The revival of great power politics on the European continent has revealed the enduring importance of hard power and military security. Della Sala argues that 'the Ukraine crisis weakens the EU's foundational narrative as an exceptional actor and highlights how crisis in this instance is not a basis for falling forward but for putting into question its sense of self.'

Not every shock generates the same sense of consternation and upheaval. Sceptics may reject the binary distinction between ontological security and insecurity. Hagström suggests that 'critical situations are not an aberration from the normal but a more endemic aspect of great power self-identification and ontological security-seeking…the self [is] more fundamentally fluid and fractured, incoherent, and incomplete.'[16] It is also true that the sharp distinction between security and insecurity can be misleading, since these conditions are fluid and dependent on interpretation.

The literature remains inconclusive on the specific conditions that make a political event an ontological security shock, as well as on how to distinguish between critical and ordinary situations.[17] Steele offers a criteria for critical situations which requires that they affect a substantial number of individuals, catch state agents off guard, and cause agents to perceive that they could be eliminated.[18] However, Steele also acknowledges the ambiguity of identifying these critical situations, writing 'it is largely unimportant whether I as a researcher decide that a series of events meets this definition…what is important is whether agents interpreted an event as a "critical situation".'[19]

The central argument of this paper adopts Steele's somewhat more interpretivist understanding of ontological security shocks: critical situations exist when they are perceived to be a critical situation by elites and the public alike. Researchers can then look at available evidence to support their claims for whether an ontological security shock has (not) happened. The following section examines the history of the Canada-US relationship to put the tariff and annexation threats into a broader historical context. Available evidence reveals that there has been a violation of the 'basic trust system' in Canada's ontological security, as demonstrated by the sharp cascade in public attitudes towards the United States, spontaneous acts of public outrage, and political speeches across the political spectrum. Though perhaps not as dramatic as Serbia's claims to Kosovo or the Russo-Ukraine War, the expansionist rhetoric of Trump and the threat of tariffs have provoked a significant shift in expressions of Canadian identity in both political discourse and public reactions alike.

Trade Shocks and Ontological Security

Canadian history is replete with trade shocks from its closest friends and neighbours. In 1846, Britain repealed the Corn Laws and adopted free trade, which ended Canada's preferential access to its markets and pushed it to turn towards the United States as a trade partner.[20] The economic fallout was so significant that hundreds of primarily English-speaking merchants and reformers signed the 'Montreal Annexation

Manifesto' in 1849 calling for annexation to the United States.[21] The movement failed to gain significant popular support, in part because Canada eventually achieved access to American markets with the signing of the Elgin-Marcy Reciprocity Treaty in 1854.[22] The treaty established a period of free trade between the two countries, with reduced duties on natural resources and agricultural products. Reciprocity was abruptly terminated by the United States in 1866, in part due to dissatisfaction with Britain over its perceived support for the Confederacy during the American Civil War.[23] The loss of the American market strengthened the case for Canadian Confederation, which was achieved the following year.

The twentieth century saw several more trade shocks to Canada from the United States. The Smoot-Hawley Tariff Act of 1930, imposed as a response to the Great Depression, prompted strong reactions and a pivot back to the United Kingdom. Canada took a leading role in negotiating the Ottawa Agreements of 1932, which once again gave Canada privileged access to the British market.[24] Under President Nixon, the United States imposed a 10% surcharge on all imports, including Canadian goods.[25] Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau tried to change Nixon's view, telling him 'If you're going to be protectionist, let's be in it together...I am not a nationalist, I am not a protectionist – if you were going to take a very protectionist trend, our whole economy is so importantly tied to yours, we'd have to make some very fundamental decisions.'[26] Though Nixon's tariffs were brief, lifted four months after they were first imposed, they caught Canada by surprise and prompted a significant shift in Canadian economic and foreign policy, a policy shift which shall be explored further in this paper. [27]

Trade relations between Canada and the United States faced frictions again in the twenty-first century. Border thickening after 9/11 negatively impacted cross-border trade flows, and President Obama's 'Buy American' stimulus policy mandated that projects had to source their iron, steel, and manufactured goods exclusively from the United States. [28] [29] These 'fender benders' would soon pale in comparison with the tariffs on lumber, steel, and aluminium imposed by President Trump during his first term in office.[30] Nevertheless, those tariffs were eventually lifted with the signing of the US-Canada-Mexico Free Trade Agreement in 2019.[31]

Significant trade shocks from close allies are insufficient to generate ontological insecurity. Reflecting on Steele's criteria for an ontological security shock, it must affect a substantial number of individuals, catch state agents off guard, and cause agents to perceive that they could be eliminated. Most importantly, these situations must be interpreted as critical situations by elites and public alike. According to ontological security studies, these moments of ontological insecurity then generate re-imaginations of state identity and a selective articulation and re-telling of autobiographical narratives. Based on these criteria, the cases of British free trade (1846), reciprocity abrogation (1866), and the Nixon shocks (1971) could stand out as moments of ontological insecurity for Canada since they combined surprise, existential anxiety, and sweeping social consequences. These cases all contributed to significant pivots in Canadian national narratives and identity, including the formation of Canada itself. The motivation for this paper, however, is to examine whether the trade shocks and annexation rhetoric in the first weeks of President Trump's second term can also qualify as an ontological

security shock to Canada and, if so, assess how that ontological insecurity is driving narrative, identity, and geo-strategic change.

Trump II and Canada's Ontological Insecurity

"Geography has made us neighbours. History has made us friends. Economics has made us partners. And necessity has made us allies."

~ President John F. Kennedy address to the Canadian Parliament May 17, 1961

The first weeks of President Trump's second term brought a new rhetoric of annexation unprecedented in the past century and a half of Canada-US relations. From his election win to his first month in office, President Trump referenced Canada as the '51st state' in five separate social media posts, including a map of North America covered in the American flag, while repeatedly referring to Prime Minister Justin Trudeau as 'Governor Trudeau.'[32]

In response, Canadians booed the Star-Spangled Banner at professional sport events, cancelled travel plans to the United States, and pledged to boycott American products. Almost overnight, Canadian public opinion underwent titanic shifts, with a rally-around-the-flag effect propping up an erstwhile deeply unpopular Liberal government and visible expressions of patriotism not seen in generations. While scholars of political behaviour might take interest in how a new common enemy has caused a striking change in the hearts and minds of Canadians, this paper looks at these shifts through an ontological security lens: more than just uniting around a common enemy, the overtly annexationist tone and economic threats from the American president had produced enormous ontological insecurity in Canada which was revealed in the new narratives and memories evoked by Canadian leaders and public alike.

The tariff and annexation rhetoric provoked such a strong, overtly patriotic reaction because the United States as a friend and partner is fundamental to Canada's physical and ontological security. Yes, Canada and the United States share extensive political, economic, and security ties. They are each other's most significant trading partner and source of foreign investment. They jointly participate in continental air defence through NORAD and work together through NATO and Five Eyes intelligence sharing.[33] Over 400,000 people cross the border each day. But beyond these material ties, the relationship also has a strong ideational and social dimension: the United States is viewed as a close friend and partner, and any territorial ambitions toward Canada have been unthinkable to both the Canadian public and political elite for over a century.

One prominent narrative frame used to describe the Canada–US relationship is that of family and kinship.[34] In their first meeting after the 9/11 attacks, George Bush Jr. said to Prime Minister Chrétien: 'An amazing thing came up the other day. Somebody said to me, well, you know, in your speech to Congress, there were some that took affront in Canada because I didn't mention the name. I didn't necessarily think it was important to praise a brother; after all, we're talking about family.'[35] Chrétien replied, 'I think that, as

you say…we're your neighbour, friends and family…and we had a great demonstration of support when 100,000 Canadians appeared on the hill to offer support to our neighbour and friends and family, the Americans.'[36]

Similar kinship narratives have been expressed by successive presidents. Obama declared 'the United States and Canada are not simply allies, not simply neighbours; we are woven together like perhaps no other two countries in the world. We're bound together by our societies, by our economies, by our families.'[37] Biden described Americans and Canadians as 'two people, two countries, in my view, sharing one heart. It's a personal connection. No two nations on Earth are bound by such close ties — friendship, family, commerce, and culture.'[38]

That Canada imagines itself as having a unique friendship with the United States is not unique to Canada. Britain, of course, cherishes its 'special relationship' as first coined by Winston Churchill. France similarly cites its long history with the United States from the Revolutionary War up through to the Beaches of Normandy and present day. But this bears little relevance on Canada's self-image. For Canada, the near kinship bonds of mutual trust and affection are an integral part of Canada's ontological security. The policy shift in Washington in President Trump's second term has undermined this foundation, perhaps irreparably, provoking the largest exogenous shock to Canadian ontological security in living memory.

The sense of personal betrayal is clearly revealed in Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's address to the Canadian people on February 4, 2025, in the face of imminent tariffs to be imposed (and later temporarily postponed) by Trump. He recited President Kennedy's quote on Canada-US relations and goes on to say:

> *"From the beaches of Normandy to the mountains of the Korean Peninsula, from the fields of Flanders to the streets of Kandahar, we have fought and died alongside you during your darkest hours. During the Iranian hostage crisis, those 444 days, we worked around the clock from our embassy to get your innocent compatriots home. During the summer of 2005, when Hurricane Katrina ravaged your great city of New Orleans, or mere weeks ago, when we sent water bombers to tackle the wildfires in California, during the day the world stood still — Sept. 11, 2001 — when we provided refuge to stranded passengers and planes, we were always there, standing with you, grieving with you, the American people."*

Trudeau's speech is replete with references to a historical narrative which expresses Canada's core ontological security: that it is a reliable friend and partner to the United States, which is sustained by its repeated interactions of cooperation and support. Trudeau's political adversary, Conservative leader Pierre Poilievre, shared similar attitudes towards the United States in a speech a few weeks later, expressing that Canadians view the United States as neighbours and friends, and that there is no other country with whom we would rather share a border.[39] 'If Canadians aren't your friends', Poilievre asked, 'then who is?'

Important for this ontological security shock is not just the policy disagreement over tariffs, which as history shows has happened throughout Canadian history, but the

genuine sense of betrayal from their closest friend – a deeply personal relationship. Evidence of this can be found beyond just these political speeches and in other parts of Canadian society. In the *Real Kyper and Bourne* hockey podcast, sports commentators Nick Kypreos and Justin Bourne said 'you want to drag in a President that wants to strip us of our country on a day of a hockey game…they don't know how sensitive we are about this annexation stuff, it's a joke there, they don't know how touchy we are about this, which we should be.'[40] Fasken Martineau DuMoulin LLP, one of Canada's most influential law firms, cancelled a corporate retreat in Las Vegas because 'Canada is facing an unwarranted economic attack by what has, for more than 150 years, been its closest ally and trading partner.'[41] Every incidence of Canadians expressing betrayal with their closest friend would be well beyond the scope of this paper, but these two disparate examples from high-profile figures in Canadian society demonstrate the breadth, magnitude, and deeply personal nature of this ontological security shock. Early polling has shown that the percentage of Canadians with favourable attitudes towards the United States dropped from 52% in June 2024 to 33% by March 2025.[42] Even more striking, just over a quarter of Canadians polled in February 2025 considered America as an enemy country.[43]

It is worth mentioning that the ontological insecurity is not strictly proportional to the actual credibility of the annexation threat. Trump himself stated he would use economic, rather than military means, to turn Canada into the 51st state.[44] While the threat of economic coercion is credible, American domestic politics and the delicate partisan balance of the Senate makes Canadian statehood a non-starter even in the outlandish world in which Canadians agreed to joining the United States. Opinion polling early into Trump's second term found that only a third of Canadians believed annexation was a serious ambition.[45] It was therefore not the fear of American tanks rolling across the border that drove these elevated threat perceptions but rather the previously unimaginable disregard for Canadian sovereignty in American discourse which triggered the ontological security threat.

Trump's first month back in office upended relations between America and many of its allies. Annexation fears were not unique to Canada, with Greenland, Panama, and Gaza also the subject of expansionist remarks by the president. Nevertheless, the threat of economic coercion and rhetoric of American domination has become a *'Zeitenwende'* moment for Canada as it realises the fragility of its quasi-fraternal relationship with the United States. The next section looks at the 1971 Nixon shocks as a past example of ontological insecurity in Canada and explores how it led to selective re-awakenings of identity narratives and policy changes in the foreign and domestic realm. I then consider how Trump's ontological security shock has impacted Canada's various strategic subcultures, with an eye to how this moment will impact the future collective historical memory in Canadian foreign policy.

Strategic Implications of Ontological Insecurity

According to ontological security studies, moments of insecurity can generate changes in state policy and autobiographical narratives. It's important to recognise that this has happened before in Canadian history. In the aftermath of the Nixon shocks, for example, Mitchell Sharp, Canada's Secretary of State for External Affairs, wrote an

influential article entitled *Canada-US Relations: Options for the Future.* The motivation for his paper was clear:

> *"In the past, Canadians have generally supported an easy-going, pragmatic approach to our relations with the United States in the belief that Canada's separate national existence and development were fully compatible with an unfolding, increasingly close economic, cultural and military relationship between the two countries. Many Canadians no longer accept this view...It is widely believed that the continental pull, especially economic and cultural, has gained momentum. In this on-going national debate, the fundamental question for Canada is whether and to what extent interdependence with the United States impairs the reality of Canada's independence.*[46] *(Emphasis added)"*

Sharp identified three paths Canada could take in light of the exposed risks of American interdependence: (i) maintain the status quo, (ii) move towards closer integration with the United States, or (iii) pursue a 'comprehensive long-term strategy to strengthen the Canadian economy and other aspects of its national life' to reduce Canadian vulnerability.[47] In his evaluation of these paths forward, the question of Canadian identity is front and centre, which reflects his anxiety about Canada's autobiographical narrative and distinctiveness from America. He writes: 'If Canadians say they want a distinct country...it is because they want to do the things they consider important and do them in their own way.'[48] Any closer integration with the United States would 'involve costs in terms of the Canadian identity' and 'could involve a serious strain on the domestic consensus in Canada.'

Pierre Trudeau's government pursued the 'third option': on the home front, his government adopted a national industrial strategy by limiting foreign investment and building state-run corporations, such as Petro-Canada. As for strategic policy, the Trudeau government pivoted to Europe as a counterbalance to the United States, which was a marked difference from past policy. Mahant writes that the Nixon shocks had a 'profound effect on Canadian policymakers, already under pressure from some sections of public opinion to react to what appeared to be a growing Canadian dependence on the United States,' which 'led directly to a new attitude towards the European Community.' [49] According to Mahant, 'until 1971 or 1972, Canadian policymakers viewed the European Community with apprehension. The Common Agricultural Policy and the treaties with Mediterranean and African countries were seen as threats to Canada's interests,' but 'these apprehensions did not...lead to the formulation of a new policy until the changing attitude towards the United States.'[50] Yet another reason for pivoting to Europe was that Canada's traditional partner, Britain, had joined the European Economic Community in 1973, which simultaneously expanded the attractiveness of trade with Europe while cutting Canada's preferential access to the British market.[51]

The brief case study of Canada's response to the Nixon shocks reveals a crucial insight about ontological insecurity and strategic policy: latent anxieties about Canadian identity and its distinctiveness from the United States were compounded by the Nixon shocks, leading to a period of acute ontological insecurity. This led to dramatic policy changes not just on the home front but also in international affairs: perceptions of the United States and Europe changed among Canadian decisionmakers, resulting in new

foreign policies.

While Sharp wrote of the 'three options', a typology which enjoys considerable currency in Canadian discourse, his options centre primarily around economic and culture matters, with a narrow focus on Canada-US relations. Another way to think about Canada's foreign policy postures is through its distinctive 'strategic cultures', each of which has historically guided Canadian foreign policy and practice at some point in its history.

Massie and Vucetic identify three dominant strategic subcultures in Canadian political discourse which have shaped Canadian foreign policy and practice: Atlanticism, Continentalism, and Commonwealth Imperialism.[52] While other subcultures have influenced Canadian politics, such as Pearsonian Internationalism and Isolationism, they have taken a diminished role in recent years.[53] Strategic subcultures are not mutually exclusive. They are also not deterministic – many Atlanticist political leaders frequently invoke the special relationship with America. Canada's significant involvement in the War in Afghanistan, for example, is in line with both Atlanticist and Continentalist impulses. However, the utility of strategic subcultures as a theoretical concept comes from disaggregating the different 'currents' in a country's political culture when pertaining to questions of international affairs.

The next section surveys these three dominant strategic subcultures and then examines how their adherents have changed their narratives and threat perceptions after the ontological security shock brought about by Trump's first months in office. I also offer some reflections on how Canadian foreign policy might evolve given its latest ontological security shock.

Atlanticism

The Atlanticist strategic subculture emphasises Canada's Atlantic identity and commitment to NATO.[54] Atlanticism values maintaining transatlantic solidarity and avoiding Anglo-American unilateralism, with the aim of raising Canada's relevance in international politics. France's role in NATO and historic connection to Canada resonates with Canada's own domestic bilingual identity.[55] Whereas Continentalism is more associated with the Conservative Party, the Liberal Party tends to express more Atlanticist views on international politics.

Justin Trudeau's successor, Mark Carney, has invoked strong Atlanticist rhetoric in the early months of his tenure, though with significant changes in trust perceptions vis-à-vis Europe and the United States. In his first speech as Liberal leader, Carney made the following remarks: 'The Americans want our resources, our water, our land, our country. Think about that. If they succeed, they will destroy our way of life.' He continues later exclaiming: 'America is not Canada. And Canada never, ever, will be part of America in any way, shape or form…in trade, as in hockey, Canada will win. But, this victory will not be easy. We are facing the most important crisis of our lives.' It is hard to overstate the significance of this speech and the dramatic shift in attitude toward the United States: they are a threat to not just Canadian resources but also a threat to sovereignty and the Canadian way of life. Notably, Carney did not mention threats from Russia or China in

his inaugural speech. The most salient threat was the American one.

Atlanticism in Canada has always relied on balancing American and European interests while elevating Canada's role in NATO as a way to remain relevant in global politics.[56] Trump's retreat from NATO and European security more broadly has pushed Canada to advocate even stronger for the alliance's continued relevance and Canada's own place in European affairs. A somewhat tongue-in-cheek editorial in *The Economist* proclaimed that Canada should join the EU, citing the joint interest in the face of American unilateralism.[57] While such a formal institutional arrangement remains the stuff of fantasy, the collapsing Canadian public opinion towards the United States will likely push Canada to rekindle other familiar friendships. In a break from tradition, Carney's first international trip as Prime Minister was to Europe, not Washington. He stated it was important to strengthen ties with 'reliable allies.'[58] President Macron replied that Canada was the 'most European of non-European countries.'[59]

In this environment, it seems that Atlanticist strategic culture will continue its hegemony in Canadian foreign policy: Canada has thus far retained its commitment to NATO and even committed to expanded defence spending to meet its 2% (and later 5%) obligation.[60] Coordinated foreign policy moves with the UK and France regarding recognition of the Palestinian state have also signalled a stronger alignment with Canada's traditional European partners.[61]

In addition to elite-level alignment, the post-Trump ontological security shock has dramatically adjusted the public's friend-foe calculus, leading Canadians to be far more distrustful of America while becoming more enthusiastic about European relations. Early public opinion data seems to validate these claims, with one finding that a plurality of Canadians would support EU membership.[62] This poll also found that while Canadians thought of America as their most important relationship at the time, they also anticipated the relationship with the EU surpassing in importance within three years. The historical memory of the Trump shock may harden these attitudes and consolidate the Atlanticist paradigm for years to come.

Continentalism

The shared historical experience of World War I & II and the emerging Cold War saw the United States go from Canada's security threat to Canada's guardian.[63] An emerging 'Continentalist' strategic subculture began to shape Canadian perceptions and foreign policy as Canada increasingly embraced its identity as a North American, rather than British, country. This identity took the form of close security cooperation through the creation of the North American Aerospace Defence Command (NORAD) in 1958, which monitored and controlled continental airspace. Canada and the United States also signed the 'Auto Pact' of 1965 which formally integrated automobile manufacturing in North America.

The relationship with the United States became of paramount importance, with Canada seeking to reassure its powerful ally that it was a reliable partner. Given the power imbalance, maintaining Canadian sovereignty was a sensitive issue for Ottawa. Writing in 1984, Nils Ørvik assessed Canada's Cold War strategic position as follows: 'we face

two threats, one from expanding incompatible systems, currently represented by the Soviet Union…the other threat comes from our neighbours to the south who, in their legitimate concern about the security of the North American continent, might offer us "help" which we may not want, but still cannot reject because it also serves our own national interests as well as theirs.'[64] For Ørvik, the best way to prevent Washington's encroachment on Canadian sovereignty would be to credibly show that Canada could hold its own without a physical American military presence, or as he calls it a "defence against help" strategy.

Even after the Cold War, the identity of Canada as a North American country and reliable American ally remained an enduring feature of Canadian politics. Up until Trump's second presidency institutional bonds remained firm, cemented by the North American Free Trade Agreement (1992) and its successor, the US-Canada-Mexico Free Trade Agreement (2019). There is also evidence that this closer integration is not just a rationalist or functionalist economic preference but a reflection of embedded continentalist attitudes in the Canadian public.[65] These attitudes are most visible in Alberta, which can be traced back to its immigration by frontier ranchers in the late nineteenth century which instilled a more American political culture when compared to the loyalist waves of immigration elsewhere in English Canada.[66]

Continentalism today is associated with the Conservative Party of Canada but this has not always been the case. The Liberal government under Wilfred Laurier (1896-1911) unsuccessfully pushed for free trade with America while the Conservatives led by Robert Borden feared economic ties would lead to American annexation.[67] Pierre Trudeau's tenure (1968-1979; 1980-1984) saw a rise in social democratic nationalism and an ambivalent attitude toward the United States, which gradually changed the ideological orientation of continentalism in Canada.[68] Progressive Conservative leader Brian Mulroney opposed the economic nationalism of Trudeau Sr. and pushed the Canadian right-wing to gradually embrace free trade with the United States undergirded by an ideological Continentalism.[69]

The tension between Continentalist and Atlanticist subcultures is best demonstrated through the role conceptions invoked in debates on whether Canada should have joined the US-led invasion of Iraq in March 2003. Then-Prime Minister Jean Chrétien defended Canada's non-participation in the Iraq War because it was not approved by the United Nations Security Council. The fact that it was a unilateral mission, rather than NATO-led, further weakened its legitimacy. In contrast, Canada's participation in the NATO campaign in Kosovo demonstrates that either UNSC-approval or NATO-command are necessary conditions for Atlanticist participation.

In response, then-Leader of the Opposition and future Prime Minister, Stephen Harper, wrote an op-ed in the Wall Street Journal entitled "Canadians Stand With You" in which he lamented: 'For the first time in history, the Canadian government has not stood beside its key British and American allies in their time of need…make no mistake, as our allies work to end the reign of Saddam and the brutality and aggression that are the foundations of his regime, Canada's largest opposition party will not be neutral. In our hearts and minds, we will be with our allies and friends.'[70]

The ontological insecurity shock has been particularly difficult for Continentalist attitudes in Canada. While many Canadians continue to hold pro-American views, the narratives and self-conception of being America's staunchest ally and partner have been challenged and are increasingly difficult to sell to the voting public. The response from Continentalists in Canada has been largely focused on economics and trade, recognising the need to diversify markets without necessarily viewing the United States as a threat to Canadian way of life as Atlanticists have suggested.

In a keynote address to Midwestern Legislative Conference in July 2025, former Prime Minister Stephen Harper remarked: 'I think it's fair to say I'm probably the most pro-American prime minister in Canadian history…but this really is a wake-up call for this country to truly diversify its trade export markets…just because we have that geographic proximity does not justify the degree of dependence that we have on a single market.'[71] This sentiment echoes remarks given by Conservative leader Pierre Poilievre during the 2025 election campaign. Poilievre's 'Canada First' speech kept threat perceptions fixed on traditional adversaries and kept space for cooperation with the United States. He promised: 'Our military will protect our national interest—including by carrying our weight in North America to secure and leverage more trade with the United States, all while becoming less reliant on them for our defence…hostile powers like China and Russia want our resources, our shipping routes, and to be within striking distance of our continent. We won't let them. We will defend our seas, our skies and our soil.'[72]

Perhaps most interesting with respect to the relationship between ontological insecurity and autobiographical narrative has been the evolving historical memory of Canada's first Prime Minister, John A. Macdonald, in the discourse of Canada's Conservative Party and its leader, Pierre Poilievre. In a 2012 speech unveiling the newly renamed John A. Macdonald building across from Canada's Parliament Hill, then Parliamentary Secretary Pierre Poilievre reflected on the first prime minister's legacy as follows:

> *"It's thanks to him we have the Canadian Pacific Railway, it's thanks to him we have the formation of the Northwest Mounted Police, it's thanks to him we have the very first national park…in Banff, Alberta, and most of all it's thanks to him that we have a Confederation, a dominion that we all inherited. This was his greatest achievement: stitching together a nation comprised of different ethnicities, religions, cultures, backgrounds – people who were warring for centuries on the other side of the Atlantic – whom he forced into a peaceful, harmonious and, most importantly, free nation."*[73]

Note that this historical memory narrowly focuses on domestic policy achievements, without referencing his anti-American credentials. In Poilievre's Canada First speech in February 2025, however, he emphasised Macdonald's anti-American roots, declaring:[74]

> *"Conservatives, as the Party of Confederation and Sir John A. Macdonald, will restore the promise of Canada. Our founding party leader united our country from the Atlantic to the Pacific and warded off American designs to dominate our continent. In the words of our first Prime Minister, Conservatives will fight to "give us a great, a united, a rich, an improving, a developing Canada, instead of making us a tributary to American laws, to American railways, to American bondage, to American tolls".*

That is the Conservative legacy for Canada. (Emphasis added)"

The renewed focus on the anti-American positions of early conservatives illustrates the dynamic nature of historical memory. The argument here is not to say that Poilievre was being duplicitous or just instrumentally deploying new rhetoric to meet the moment: rather, this is a compelling example of how an ontological security shock can lead to a selective re-telling of national autobiographies in order to provide a sense of continuity and familiarity.

Continentalists in the post-Trump shock have tapped into deep historical narratives of Canada's conservative, anti-American Fathers of Confederation while maintaining support for economic and defence cooperation with the United States. The historical memory of the Trump shock could nevertheless live on for years, which would solidify into a broader anti-American consensus in wider public opinion and diminish the persuasiveness of the Continentalist strategic orientation.

Commonwealth Imperialism

The Commonwealth Imperialist subculture emerged from Canada's history as a British colony and its close relationship to one of its "mother countries." The relationship between Canada and Britain in the first decades after the Acts of Confederation in 1867 was more than economic or political, it was also deeply personal. Much of the English Canadian population in the early nineteenth century had come from America fleeing the Revolutionary War and harboured negative attitudes towards the United States. Many English Canadians signed up for the Boer War in 1899 as an act of patriotism for the empire.[75]

Overt expressions of Canada's British Imperial connection gradually waned after World War I, with much of Canada's political trajectory in the 20th century focused on coming into its own as a country. Nossal writes: 'Canadian involvement in the Great War diminished the enthusiasm for imperialism among many English-speaking Canadians. While it did not extinguish imperial sentiment, it did give rise to a desire to control all elements of policy, domestic and external…a logical outgrowth of the autonomy in domestic policy achieved with confederation in 1867.'[76] Though Canada achieved formal independence at the Statute of Westminster in 1931, '[this] did not suddenly extinguish those imperialist sentiments that had fuelled the enthusiasm for war in 1914…imperial sentiment would linger throughout the interwar period [but] its political impact was more limited.'[77] Canada's participation in the Ottawa Conference of 1932, which granted preferential access to the British market, demonstrates the enduring connection with Britain even as the country came into its own. Canada remains an active member of the Commonwealth and has yet to see an overt republican movement to replace its monarchy.

As Canada searches for reliable allies, Canada's ties with the United Kingdom and its Commonwealth relationships may re-emerge in Canadian discourse. One of the implications of an ontological security shock is a strong sense of insecurity as one navigates a new and destabilising environment, and Canada's British institutional heritage is one such narrative and identity which might offer familiarity and stability.

Indeed, Carney's swearing-in speech made several direct allusions to this Britain link: 'The ceremony we just witnessed reflects the wonder of a country built on the bedrock of three peoples: Indigenous, French and British. The opening and closing prayers evoke the original stewards of this land to remind us of the deep roots from which we grow and underscore the values to which we aspire. The office of the Governor General links us through the Crown and across time to Canada's proud British heritage.'[78]

One obvious policy decision which would reflect this Commonwealth strategic culture and historical emphasis on Canada's British heritage would be the free movement of people and goods between Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom – known colloquially as 'CANZUK.' Such a move enjoys a wide coalition of support, even before the Trump-shock. Former Conservative leader Erin O'Toole is in favour,[79] while Liberal leadership contender, Frank Baylis, declared his support for CANZUK during an intra-party debate: '80 percent of our trade exports go towards the United States. That's why I propose a new economic bloc that would gather the CANZUK countries – Canada, the United Kingdom, Australia and New Zealand. Why? Because we share the same kind of government, we share the same kind of values, the same language, and it means we can work together closely.'[80]

Bell and Vucetic note that the CANZUK discourse is rooted in imperial history and in particular efforts to create a federalised empire.[81] Its loudest proponents in the United Kingdom have historically made the case for CANZUK in decidedly racialised and Eurosceptic terms, with the movement gaining traction in the aftermath of Brexit. With this imperial baggage, CANZUK had largely been written off as an undesirable or unworkable project. The ontological security shock, however, may be changing the terms of this debate. The Overton window for speaking of Canada's British identity has been widened in the face of such anti-American public sentiments and the search for a stable and secure ontological identity. In reference to fears that Britain wasn't standing up for Canada against Trump, Foreign Minister Mélanie Joly remarked 'it is just in our DNA to be close to the UK.'[82]

The Commonwealth strategic culture, with its pro-CANZUK friend calculus and imperial historical memory, is not incompatible with the aforementioned Atlanticist pivot in Canadian discourse. Subcultures are helpful tools for understanding the cultural roots of different 'currents' in foreign policy discourse, not mutually exclusive theories of state behaviour. The argument advanced here is simply that the ontological security shock has led to a redefinition of stable identities and a search for historical meaning. One such identity and self-conception is Canada's British linkage, which may push Canada to pursue strengthened Anglosphere security and economic cooperation.

Conclusion

Trump's tariff and annexation threats were not just a political challenge for Canada, nor were they merely a threat to Canada's political and economic security. They also constituted a threat to Canada's *ontological security* – its stable sense of self and the patterned relationships which constitute its social identity. After decades of quasi-fraternal relations shaped by mutual trust and cooperation, Trump's, previously unthinkable, '51st state' rhetoric created a rupture in Canada-US relations.

This ontological security shock altered the historical narratives and friend-foe calculations of Canada's dominant strategic subcultures. Atlanticists have embraced a dramatic pivot away from America and towards Europe, framing the United States as a serious threat to national identity and security. Continentalists have tapped into old historical memories of Canada's Fathers of Confederation, emphasising their nationalist bona fides while nevertheless keeping the door open for a continued, albeit diminished, relationship with the United States. Meanwhile, the relatively dormant Commonwealth strategic culture has enjoyed a revival, driven by efforts to distinguish Canada's identity from the United States through a renewed emphasis on the country's historic British roots.

The case of Canada in the first months of Trump's second presidency illustrates the analytic utility of strategic culture and ontological security in understanding the relationship between foreign policy and national identity. Identity narratives and historical memories are never fixed but rather reimagined to fit the contemporary political moment, and dramatic shocks to a nation's sense of self have the power to precipitate these reimaginations.

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