The US, Canada and the Nature of Middle Powers

by George Friedman - February 2, 2026

If nations were thought of as individuals, then the relationship between the United States and Canada would be that of two humans living side by side, intimately entangled, with unique virtues and vices – the first binding them together, the second forcing them apart. When brought together, people tend take each other for granted. When apart, they see each other as untrustworthy. Obviously, the two people I am speaking of are married, as are the U.S. and Canada – by geography, history and mutual dependency. Geography makes a divorce impossible, but as with a good marriage, anger and distrust can be overcome by love or, lacking that, necessity. The U.S. and Canada cannot divorce and go their own way.

For one thing, they share the longest land border in the world. For another, Canada exports about 75 percent of its exports to the United States. A little less than 25 percent of U.S exports go to Canada. More than 10 percent of U.S. imports come from Canada, while 82 percent of Canada's imports come from the United States. By the numbers, Canada is more economically dependent on the U.S. than the U.S. is on Canada, but the sheer volume of bilateral trade creates a fundamental co-dependency.

They are also mutually dependent on each other for national security. The U.S. is to Canada as Canada is to Greenland, only several thousand times over. During the Cold War, the greatest threat to the U.S. was a Soviet nuclear attack. Russian missiles would come over the Arctic, passing Canada before reaching the U.S. mainland. A series of radar stations, called the Distant Early Warning Line, was strung across northern Canada. The North American Aerospace Defense Command, or NORAD, is a joint command headquartered in Colorado and commanded by a U.S. Air Force general. His deputy is Canadian. The Golden Dome defense system that President Donald Trump speaks of as essential cannot exist without Canadian participation.

In other words, the two are entangled strategically, having fought wars together and having shared intelligence with each other for years through the Five Eyes initiative (which also includes the United Kingdom, Australia and New Zealand). Were Canada to become a hostile nation or be occupied by a hostile nation, the U.S. would have to man a 5,000-mile-long (8,000-kilometer-long) border.

Though divorce is thus impossible, it is easy for them to irritate each other as far as they can. This gives Trump room for maneuver. The real question, however, is why Trump would choose to irritate Canada. As I have written before, Trump has pursued a two-part national strategy. Part one has been to reduce U.S. engagement in the Eastern Hemisphere, dramatically reducing its military involvement there. Part two is to dominate the Western Hemisphere, reducing U.S. vulnerability and, presumably, increasing the economic power of the Western Hemisphere. U.S. tariffs were meant to limit the U.S. economic involvement in the Eastern Hemisphere while increasing U.S. control over Western economies and, in theory, making them richer. Since Trump's engineering process is based on creative destruction, he imposed tariffs in the Western Hemisphere as well, and that included Canada. (This would also explain U.S. military action in Venezuela and, potentially, in Cuba and Greenland.)

This left Canada in some degree of pain but with little gain for the United States, save for consistency, if that is a virtue. For Canada, there was a profound sense of betrayal. This prompted Prime Minister Mark Carney's critical speech at Davos, during which he said it was time for the middle powers to take the place of the great powers in shaping the global order. The fact that he had reached an economic agreement with China that angered Trump raises a question of whether the middle powers could operate without colliding with the great powers (China and the United States). More puzzling was what he meant by the middle powers, and why he thought they would work together to create a new world order. I assume the middle powers are countries such as Britain, India, Japan, Germany, South Korea and so on. The problem with middle powers is that they must concern themselves with great powers as well as regional neighbors. Great powers are, by definition, global in at least one of two geopolitical forces, military or economic. They can affect the world as a whole. No middle nation can do that by itself, and each is profoundly affected by global powers in its own way. They may share the desire to undermine global powers, but they do not have a common strategy to do so.

Carney's speech missed the fact that middle powers are middle powers because of their limits and their dependency, to some degree or another, on great powers. They do not have the ability to work together because their power is middling. Carney's speech was excellent rhetoric, but his deal with China was actually a deal with one of the great powers. His speech was a tonic and certainly should have increased Canadian pride, but the truth is that the middle powers have very different interests and locations. Speeches are necessary, but reality trumps them.

Trump would welcome middle powers shouldering their fair share of regional management so that the U.S. doesn't have to take on the majority of the burden. The U.S. and Canada cannot divorce, but as in any marriage, they occasionally make threats and behave unpleasantly. Reality is reality,

and the U.S.-Canada relationship cannot be broken or replaced. If theirs was a human marriage, I would advise counseling. Since they are nations, they know that time, not therapy, resolves these issues. Necessity ultimately is the foundation of U.S.-Canada relations.

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