FROM STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP TO MANAGED FRICTIONS: THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF U.S.–CANADA RELATIONS

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Abstract. *This article examines the evolving dynamics of U.S.–Canada relations during 2024–2026, arguing that the partnership has transitioned from seamless alignment to a state of managed friction. Despite deep integration in trade, security, energy, and border management, recent disputes over tariffs, defense spending, environmental policy, and migration demonstrate that the relationship now requires active negotiation rather than automatic harmony. Drawing on the theoretical lens of asymmetrical interdependence (Keohane & Nye, 1977) and the literature on middle power diplomacy, the analysis highlights how structural imbalances in size and power allow the United States to impose costs, while Canada relies on institutions and coalition-building to safeguard its interests.*

Keywords: *U.S.–Canada relations; asymmetrical interdependence; managed frictions; USMCA; middle power diplomacy; economic nationalism; international political economy.*

Introduction

The United States and Canada have long maintained a strategic partnership, distinguished by profound economic interdependence, a shared commitment to democratic principles, and robust security cooperation. Geography established the United States and Canada as immediate neighbors, while history consolidated their alliance through successive free trade agreements and joint defense institutions, most notably the North American Aerospace Defense Command (NORAD). For decades, this partnership remained predominantly harmonious, providing the foundation for one of the world's most extensive and enduring bilateral trading relationships. In recent years, however, the relationship has shifted subtly from automatic alignment to what might be called "managed frictions."

Since the 2020 entry into force of the United States–Mexico–Canada Agreement (USMCA), which updated NAFTA, Washington and Ottawa have faced a series of domain-specific disputes across trade, defense, environmental policy, and border management.

These disagreements do not constitute a fundamental rupture: the overall ties remain robust. Yet they signal that each country is more frequently negotiating differences rather than assuming seamless

cooperation. Both governments now leverage formal agreements and diplomatic tools to prevent disputes from escalating into open conflict, thereby managing divergence within an enduring partnership. There are similarities between the concepts of "managed frictions" and "frozen conflicts," such as that between China and Taiwan. Both involve situations in which the underlying dispute remains unresolved, but escalation is deliberately avoided. Actors often have incentives to maintain the status quo—whether to avoid concessions, preserve leverage, or prevent destabilization. Both frameworks acknowledge that tensions could flare up again, either through miscalculation or deliberate provocation. In managed frictions, ambiguity is often a tool; in frozen conflicts, it is a byproduct of unresolved status. Yet both rely on unclear boundaries or contested legitimacy (Wang, et al. 2024).

Literature Review

U.S.–Canada Relations in Theory and Scholarship. The study of U.S.–Canada relations has long been shaped by themes of asymmetry, interdependence, and the durability of institutionalized cooperation. Robert Bothwell's Canada and the United States: The Politics of Partnership (2003) remains foundational in capturing the paradox of deep integration alongside recurring disputes. Bothwell emphasizes how Canada's dependence on U.S. markets coexists with persistent Canadian efforts to preserve autonomy in culture, energy, and foreign policy. This dynamic is echoed in Stephen Clarkson's Does North America Exist? (2008), which highlights the tension between integrationist forces of trade agreements like the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and the resilience of national sovereignties.

The broader theoretical lens of asymmetrical interdependence, as developed by Keohane and Nye (1977), has been particularly influential. Applied to the North American context, it explains why the United States, as the larger power, can wield disproportionate leverage, while Canada relies on rules, institutions, and coalition-building to protect its interests. The asymmetry is not only economic but also political and cultural, as Canada continually manages the spillover of U.S. domestic politics into its own policymaking.

Another strand of scholarship situates Canada within the framework of middle power diplomacy. Andrew Cooper, Kim Nossal, and others argue that Canada has historically leveraged multilateral institutions, soft power, and niche expertise to amplify its voice beyond what size alone would dictate. This perspective underscores how Canada's reliance on international institutions — from NATO to WTO to USMCA — is both a strategic choice and a necessity in offsetting U.S. dominance. Middle power behavior also explains Canada's recurring role as a bridge between the United States and broader global coalitions, such as its work in the G7 or climate negotiations.

In the realm of economic relations, scholars such as Christopher Sands and Laura Dawson (2012) highlight the extraordinary integration of U.S. and Canadian supply chains. They argue that while disputes over

softwood lumber, dairy, and "Buy American" provisions attract political attention, the underlying fabric of economic ties remains one of the most stable and deeply institutionalized in the world. Monica Gattinger (2021) has extended this analysis to energy, noting that North America functions as a highly integrated continental energy market, with Canada serving as a reliable supplier and the United States as a dominant consumer. Yet, these very linkages create vulnerabilities when policy approaches diverge, as seen in disputes over carbon pricing and pipelines.

Recent scholarship has also considered the implications of populism, nationalism, and political cycles for U.S.–Canada relations. Patrick Leblond and Judit Fabian (2017) and others note that the Trump-era trade nationalism challenged the liberal institutionalist model that had governed North America since NAFTA's inception. Scholars debate whether these tensions are episodic — a product of particular leaders — or structural, reflecting a longer-term reassertion of sovereignty in the age of globalization backlash.

Finally, the concept of "managed frictions" advanced by this article resonates with the literature on regime maintenance in international political economy. Edward Mansfield and Helen Milner (2012) have noted that even highly integrated trading blocs experience periodic disputes, but the presence of dispute resolution mechanisms prevents escalation.

Theoretical Framing

Asymmetry, Institutions, and Middle Power Strategies. This analysis is informed by three theoretical perspectives within international political economy and security studies: asymmetrical interdependence, economic nationalism versus liberal institutionalism, and middle power diplomacy.

First, asymmetrical interdependence (Keohane & Nye, 1977) provides a powerful lens to interpret U.S.–Canada relations. Canada's reliance on the U.S. market — for 75 % of its exports — contrasts with the U.S.'s far more diversified portfolio. This asymmetry enables Washington to leverage trade instruments (tariffs, regulatory standards, procurement rules) with relatively less domestic vulnerability than Ottawa faces. Canada, in turn, seeks to lock in predictability through institutions like USMCA, WTO dispute panels, and binational mechanisms such as NORAD. The 2025 disputes exemplify this pattern: unilateral U.S. tariffs on steel and aluminum had relatively modest effects on the American economy but provoked significant Canadian countermeasures.

Second, the contest between economic nationalism and liberal institutionalism is vividly illustrated in recent trade policy. Trump's tariff-first approach, invoking national security emergencies, reflects an economic nationalist logic that prioritizes domestic producers over international commitments. By contrast, Canada's defense of USMCA dispute panels and its reliance on arbitration underscore a liberal institutionalist orientation, seeking to constrain power through rules.

These clashing logics generate recurring conflict, yet the very existence of legal and diplomatic mechanisms ensures that disputes are ultimately contained. Domestic policy, however, constrains Canada's commitment to liberal internationalism. Through its supply management policy, Canada protects its dairy and poultry farmers and processors from foreign competition. Efforts by Washington to force Ottawa to open the border to U.S. exports, including complaints filed under the USMCA, have largely failed due to Canadian recalcitrance (Holland, 2025).

Third, Canada's behavior aligns with the literature on middle power diplomacy. As a middle power, Canada seeks influence not through coercion but by coalition-building, norm entrepreneurship, and institutional design. Its push to join AUKUS Pillar II, its advocacy for North American supply chain integration, and its leadership in climate forums exemplify this strategy. Middle power diplomacy also explains Canada's tendency to frame disputes in terms of global governance — for example, tying its Digital Services Tax to Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) efforts rather than presenting it solely as a bilateral issue. Taken together, these perspectives help explain why the U.S.–Canada relationship endures. Asymmetry creates tensions, nationalism sparks disputes, but institutions and middle power strategies channel them into manageable forms. The concept of "managed frictions" thus reflects the interplay of these forces.

Methodology and Critical Juncture.

This article adopts a thematic case study approach, focusing on four domains of U.S.–Canada relations: trade, defense, environmental/energy, and border management. Each domain illustrates recurring disputes within the context of institutionalized cooperation. The evidence is drawn from official documents, policy statements, secondary literature, and news sources from 2020–2025.

The period of 2024–2026 represents a critical juncture for the bilateral relationship. Three developments make it so. First, Donald Trump's return to the presidency in 2025 reintroduced a nationalist, transactional approach that heightened trade and security frictions. Second, the scheduled USMCA joint review in 2026 places extraordinary pressure on both governments to resolve outstanding disputes or risk destabilizing the foundation of North American trade. Third, Canada's 2025 federal election produced a leadership transition, injecting uncertainty into how Ottawa would navigate relations with Washington at a delicate moment. Taken together, these factors create a "stress test" of the partnership, making it an ideal moment to assess whether asymmetrical interdependence leads toward rupture or instead produces the pattern of managed divergence described in this study.

Major Areas of Bilateral Friction (2024–2025)

Against the above backdrop, several specific disputes have recently strained U.S.–Canadian relations. These tend to cluster in four domains: trade and industrial policy, defense and security,

environmental and energy issues, and border/migration management. Each friction point is distinct, but all reflect undercurrents in which national interests occasionally trump bilateral goodwill. Economic ties between the U.S. and Canada are extremely close, but they are not immune to conflict. After a relative calm in the early USMCA period, trade frictions re-emerged sharply by 2024–2025. The catalyst was the 2024 U.S. election, which returned President Donald Trump to office.

The new administration signaled it would use the looming USMCA review as leverage to extract further concessions from Canada (and Mexico) on long-standing irritants – even linking unrelated issues into trade talks (Marroquin, Hernandez-Roy & Wayne 2025). By mid-2025, Washington had adopted a hardline stance reminiscent of the 2017–2018 NAFTA renegotiation. President Trump unilaterally reimposed or hiked tariffs on various Canadian imports under broad justifications. For example, in March 2025, the U.S. imposed a 25% tariff on most Canadian goods, citing an emergency over cross-border drug trafficking, and later raised it to 35% (White House, 2025).

The administration also removed Canada's exemption from certain duty waivers (eliminating the de minimis threshold for duty-free small shipments) and quadrupled Section 232 tariffs on Canadian steel and aluminum to 50%, despite those tariffs having been lifted in 2019 (ST&R, 2025).

Although USMCA's rules mean many Canadian-origin goods still enter duty-free, these sweeping measures – which only exempt products meeting strict USMCA rules of origin – hit a wide range of exports. Canada (and China) responded with retaliatory tariffs on U.S. products, in contrast with other major U.S. trading partners, and pressed for urgent negotiations to resolve the dispute. By late 2025, Ottawa essentially made removal of these tariffs a precondition for smoothly extending USMCA beyond 2026. The specter of the trade agreement's collapse (or a return to a trade war) unnerved businesses on both sides of the border. This episode exemplified how a resurgence of U.S. economic nationalism – "tariff-first" policies under an America First agenda – directly clashes with Canada's interest in stable, rules-based trade relations.

Another trade flashpoint has been Canada's proposal for a Digital Services Tax (DST). In 2024, Canada passed legislation to introduce a 3% DST on revenues of major U.S.-owned online platforms such as Meta, Amazon, and Google, retroactive to 2022, if no OECD tax deal materialized. The United States strongly opposed the measure, viewing it as discriminatory, and even suspended trade talks in protest. Under U.S. pressure, Ottawa postponed implementation and signaled readiness to repeal the DST if a global solution emerged. Still, in late 2024, Washington requested a USMCA dispute panel—the first digital-economy case under the agreement. In June 2025, Prime Minister Mark Carney announced that Canada would halt the collection of the DST and move to formally repeal the legislation after President Trump threatened to terminate trade talks and impose additional tariffs on Canadian goods

(Sharma, 2025). Similarly, when President Trump was outraged by a TV and online advertisement, developed at the request of Ontario premier Doug Ford that played excerpts from a 1987 radio address by President Ronald Reagan criticizing tariffs, and canceled trade talks with Canada and imposed additional 10% tariffs, Prime Minister Carney apologized to Trump in an effort to restart the negotiations and lift the new tariffs (Reuters, 2025).

Another economic friction involves electric vehicles (EVs) and clean-tech subsidies in the transition to a green economy. The U.S. Inflation Reduction Act's lucrative EV incentives initially included strict "Made in America" provisions that alarmed Canada by threatening to sideline its auto sector. In response to intense lobbying by Canadian officials (and Mexico), the U.S. adjusted its EV tax credit rules to treat vehicles assembled in Canada (and Mexico) as eligible for U.S. consumer subsidies. This averted a major rift – an earlier proposal for U.S.-only EV credits would have severely hurt Canadian auto exports, and Ottawa had threatened retaliatory tariffs in that scenario. However, competition did not end there.

Both countries subsequently engaged in a subsidy race to attract EV battery plants and other clean-tech investments. In 2023, for example, Canada offered a European automaker a package worth up to C$13 (US$9.3) billion to build a battery gigafactory in Ontario, directly matching U.S. incentive levels to secure the project. Washington was reportedly displeased at the scale of Canada's bid, though from Canada's perspective, it was necessary to compete for jobs in the IRA era. Conversely, Canada and the U.S. have found common ground in protecting their industries from third-country competitors: both considered or imposed 100% tariffs on EVs imported from China in 2024, citing Beijing's heavy subsidies and the need to shield domestic producers. This shows that U.S.–Canada industrial frictions are nuanced – they collaborate against external economic threats (like China's state-backed industries) even as they vie with each other for manufacturing investment.

Overall, recent disputes over tariffs, digital taxes, and subsidies underscore a broader trend of economic nationalism on both sides. Each country, facing domestic pressures, has been inclined to prioritize home industries and tax revenues, which sometimes leads to clashing policies. Nonetheless, these disputes have been managed through USMCA mechanisms, targeted negotiations, or carve-outs (such as extending U.S. EV credits to Canadian-made cars). The fact that both governments publicly champion a "North American supply chain" approach indicates an understanding that cooperation is essential – even if behind the scenes, they haggle hard over the terms.

During Donald Trump's 2024 campaign and into his second term, he revived warnings that the U.S. might not fully defend allies who "don't pay their fair share" – remarks that naturally caused anxiety in Canada. In response, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's government (before leaving office in 2025) pledged to reach 2% of GDP by around

2032, essentially setting a distant timetable for gradual increases (Government of Canada, Department of National Defense 2024). Canada's long-term approach to meeting the 2% minimum did little to mollify Washington's immediate concerns. The persistence of Canada's defense-spending gap has thus become symbolic of divergence: from the U.S. viewpoint, a wealthy ally should contribute more to mutual security; from the Canadian viewpoint, the U.S. focus on an arbitrary metric overlooks other contributions Canada makes (e.g., specialized capabilities or substantial non-military aid).

Nonetheless, pressure from the U.S. (and within NATO) has clearly mounted. Canadian policymakers recognize that to maintain influence and goodwill, some increase in defense investment is necessary. Indeed, Canada's 2023 defense policy update and 2024 budget included modest growth in military outlays, but U.S. skepticism persists about whether Canada will follow through.

Another defense friction centers on NORAD modernization and missile defense. Both countries agree that NORAD's aerospace warning and control systems – especially in the Arctic and coastal approaches – need upgrades in light of new threats such as low-flying cruise missiles, hypersonic weapons, and drones. Canada's multi-billion-dollar NORAD modernization program (noted above) was coordinated with U.S. efforts to deploy advanced over-the-horizon radars and space-based sensors. However, debates have emerged over the scope of North American defense enhancements. The U.S. has floated the idea of an integrated ballistic missile defense for the continent – at one point dubbed a "Shield" or "Golden Dome" covering North America – which would likely require Canadian participation and co-funding. President Trump reportedly suggested it might cost Canada tens of billions of dollars to buy into a comprehensive missile defense system2. Such proposals are controversial in Canada for both financial and strategic reasons: Ottawa has historically stayed out of U.S. ballistic missile defense programs, partly to avoid weaponizing the Arctic and partly because of doubts about the system's effectiveness relative to its cost.

Thus, while Canada is investing in improved early-warning radar and limited defensive capabilities within NORAD, it remains cautious about committing to any sweeping missile defense project. This delicate balance – contributing enough to satisfy U.S. security concerns without overextending politically or financially – is likely to continue as a friction point. The U.S., for its part, understands Canada's constraints but also worries about potential coverage gaps; it may pursue interim measures if it perceives Canada's progress as too slow. All told, the NORAD and missile defense discussions reflect a classic burden-sharing negotiation, in which both sides seek to protect the continent but initially differ over how much each should invest.

Strategic initiatives outside the traditional NATO/NORAD framework have also caused friction, particularly Canada's exclusion from the initial AUKUS pact in 2021. While AUKUS was primarily about providing nuclear submarines to Australia and deepening security tech

cooperation among the three allies, many in Canada viewed the country's omission as a worrying sign of being left out of key defense partnerships. Canadian officials publicly downplayed it – noting Canada has no interest in nuclear subs – but privately, there was concern about maintaining influence as a top U.S. ally. By 2023–24, Canada actively lobbied to join the non-nuclear aspects of AUKUS ("Pillar II"), which cover areas like cyber defense, artificial intelligence, and quantum technologies. The U.S. and other AUKUS members appeared receptive: talks were opened to include Canada (and possibly other partners) in collaborative projects (Reuters, 2024). This likely forthcoming inclusion has eased what could have become a lasting grievance – essentially preventing a two-tier perception of alliance within the Five Eyes intelligence community (of which Canada is a core member). Nonetheless, the AUKUS episode fed a narrative in Ottawa that the U.S. might pursue major strategic moves without consulting Canada. To avoid being sidelined, Canada has been trying to be more proactive on Indo-Pacific security (e.g., deploying naval assets to Asia-Pacific exercises and releasing its own Indo-Pacific strategy). The underlying tension is more about consultation and status than any concrete policy dispute: Canada wants assurance that it remains a valued partner whose interests will be considered in U.S.-led initiatives. The U.S. move to involve Canada in AUKUS's tech pillar indicates an understanding of that concern and a willingness to adapt the partnership accordingly.

Finally, a subtle but important source of security friction lies in differing priorities and threat perceptions between Washington and Ottawa. U.S. policymakers often declare that "security trumps trade" in dealings with any country – meaning if a measure is deemed necessary for national security, it will override economic considerations. Canada, in contrast, has historically placed great emphasis on keeping the U.S. border open to commerce and preserving economic ties, sometimes viewing U.S. security measures as excessive. This asymmetry was evident in 2025 when President Trump invoked an emergency at the northern border due to fentanyl smuggling, using that as a rationale to impose tariffs on Canadian goods. From the American perspective, drug flows and irregular migration were genuine security issues justifying extraordinary action; from the Canadian perspective, conflating those issues with trade felt punitive and threatened the economic foundation of the relationship.

There are emerging frictions between the United States and Canada over Canada's critical-minerals strategy, even though the two countries remain broadly aligned and cooperative in this sector. The Government of Canada's Critical Minerals Strategy (2022) lays out a roadmap backed by roughly C$4 billion (US$2.85 billion) in investments. It aims for Canada to become "a global supplier of choice" of critical minerals used in batteries, clean tech, semiconductors, advanced manufacturing, and weapons systems. The United States, however, views Canada as part of its domestic defense industrial base under the Defense Production Act (DPA) and has made extensive investments in

Canadian projects that extract critical minerals and rare earth elements (REEs) (Cecco, 2024). Canada is pushing back against the US expectation that Canadian minerals primarily serve US strategic and industrial needs and is seeking additional markets in Europe and Asia (Blanchfield & Lum, 2025).

Similarly, U.S. pressure on Canada to tighten immigration controls or align 100% on sanctions against adversaries can clash with Canada's more measured approach. These differences do not usually lead to open disputes – Canada often eventually accommodates key U.S. security demands (for instance, enhancing traveler data-sharing after 9/11, or joining NORAD upgrades) – but there is a persistent undercurrent of Canadian concern that the U.S. might sacrifice bilateral trade flow in the name of security without fully considering Canadian interests. Nevertheless, as global tensions with rivals like China and Russia continue, the U.S. will likely ask Canada for even more – militarily, financially, and in terms of foreign policy alignment – in the name of Western security. Any Canadian hesitation or selective participation could become a friction point if Washington perceives it as a lack of commitment. Thus, the differing lenses through which the two countries view "security vs. economics" remain a potential source of disagreement, requiring careful balancing.

Several structural and political factors explain the recent increase in U.S.–Canada policy disagreements. First is the enduring asymmetry of power and dependence between the two. The United States is roughly 10 times Canada's economy and population, and it wields far greater global influence. This imbalance means U.S. decisions often have outsized spillover effects on Canada, sometimes without U.S. policymakers fully realizing it. American leaders may be focused on global challenges or domestic issues and give little thought to Canadian sensitivities – an attitude often described as "benign neglect" of Canada. Canadians, by contrast, pay close attention to U.S. policy because it can profoundly affect their prosperity and security. For example, U.S. tariff actions intended for domestic political gain (such as protecting the steel or lumber industries) are seen in Canada as economic blows to a partner. Similarly, the U.S. might tighten border security broadly (to stop drugs or potential terrorists) without initially considering the impact on cross-border trade and travel.

This asymmetry forces Canada into a reactive stance: much of Canadian diplomacy is devoted to responding to U.S. initiatives and safeguarding Canadian interests within U.S. policy shifts. This dynamic can breed friction when the U.S. takes actions – even those not aimed at Canada – that harm Canadian interests, such as "Buy American" procurement rules that shut out Canadian firms, or lax U.S. gun laws that result in firearms smuggled north. In short, the power imbalance doesn't cause disagreements per se, but it underlies many of them by creating a situation where the U.S. can act unilaterally while Canada must constantly "punch above its weight" to be heard. It also sometimes leads to Canadian feelings of being undervalued or American feelings

that Canada is overly reliant on U.S. protection – sentiments that can color negotiations if not managed.

A second driver is the domestic political cycle and the rise of populism in both countries. Elections and leadership changes can dramatically alter the tone of bilateral relations. The return of Donald Trump in 2024 exemplified this, bringing a nationalist, transactional approach that contrasted sharply with Biden's. In Canada, the Liberals stayed in power until 2025, but domestic pressure mounted to stand firm against Washington. The 2025 federal election brought a new prime minister, creating initial uncertainty until rapport was built with Trump.
A third factor is diverging policy priorities. The U.S., as a global power, emphasizes security threats, while Canada, shielded by geography, often prioritizes economic stability and sovereignty. This can cause frustration on both sides: Washington sees Ottawa as inattentive to security, while Ottawa sees Washington as inconsiderate of economic fallout. Examples include U.S. irritation when Canada raises softwood lumber or Buy American issues during strategic discussions, and Canadian frustration when U.S. ban policies are announced without regard for Canadian impacts.

Conclusion

U.S.–Canada relations in 2024–2026 illustrate a shift from seamless strategic partnership to a more complex landscape of "managed divergence." The two allies have not abandoned cooperation – their alliance remains strong and their ties are deeply interwoven – but they are navigating an era in which economic and political forces generate recurring frictions. Disputes in trade, defense, environment, and migration have emerged, yet these remain contained by robust institutions and recognition of mutual interdependence. The central question is whether these frictions signal deeper estrangement or are simply growing pains in a durable partnership. Barring major shocks, the outlook points toward continued managed frictions rather than rupture. The USMCA joint review in 2026 will be contentious but is likely to result in renewal, given the nearly $900 billion in annual trade and integrated industries that nurture powerful lobbies against disruption. Updated rules on digital trade, the environment, or electric vehicle (EV) content could even resolve recurring irritants. Thus, the institutional framework will remain the anchor of ongoing stability.

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