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Donald Trump has abandoned respect and goodwill

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In a press conference that the Washington Post described as a display of “rambling tangents, insults, false statements and hyperbole,” U.S. president-elect Donald Trump left no doubt he’ll carry through with his tariff threat against Canada as soon as he enters office. It means the two countries will be in an unprecedented trade war. The economic downsides will be serious – for both sides.

Mr. Trump’s unhinged rants show that he respects no rules or obligations in any relationship that the U.S. has with its partners, whether it be Canada, Mexico, Panama or its NATO allies – treaties and agreements be damned. Even before his inauguration, Mr. Trump has destroyed the value of the American signature on any such documents.

“Those whom nature hath so joined together, let no man put asunder,” president John F. Kennedy declared before Canada’s Parliament in 1961. But that 150-year “special relationship” won’t be there as long as Mr. Trump is around. One man has put it asunder.

It will take great collective resolve and a determined, unified national effort – both federally and provincially – to counteract Mr. Trump and to make sure the positive two-country relationship outlasts him, having survived over 150 years, even in periods of tensions and differences.

It's been a storied history characterized by respect and goodwill that has sometimes been put to the test, but ultimately, it is a legacy that can't be wiped out in a single presidency and should never be forgotten, notwithstanding today's fracture.

When negotiations over the maritime boundary in the Gulf of Maine stalled in the early 1980s, the two countries resolved the issue peacefully by referring it to the International Court of Justice. This was a monumental event, signifying extraordinary goodwill, with both countries showing faith in peaceful dispute resolution and both accepting the Court's 1984 decision on the final offshore boundary line.

The Gulf of Maine case wasn't the only example of this trend of mutual respect through impartial bodies. One of the first transboundary environmental disputes referred to international arbitration in the 1930s involved Canada and the U.S. accepting the panel's groundbreaking decision that Canada owed compensation to Americans affected by pollution caused by the Cominco smelter on the B.C. side of the border. And when serious flood damage in the U.S. was caused by the construction of a dam on the Canadian side of the St. Lawrence River in 1951-52 and when a negotiated settlement wasn't possible, both countries agreed to third-party arbitration and accepted the decision – Canada had to pay compensation – as final and binding.

These cases demonstrate how mature democracies handle their relations and how, until the Trump era, Canada and the U.S. have shown mutual respect. Even when negotiations stalled in tough cases, the two countries still found paths forward to resolve matters amicably.

The 1988 Canada-U.S. Free Trade Agreement (FTA), another historic milestone, exemplified this same attitude by providing for third-party resolution in trade disputes where the outcomes would be accepted by both countries. Good faith and mutual respect continued through the 1990s and first decades of this century under the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and, at least up to now, under the Canada-US-Mexico Agreement (CUSMA) as its successor.

It's hard to be optimistic about the three-country review of CUSMA scheduled for next year given Mr. Trump's chaotic, rambling approach. For the president-elect, treaties, agreements, rules and obligations have been thrown out the window and good faith has been shunted aside, overrun by Mr. Trump's proclivity for bombastic threats that shatter solemn commitments with trading partners and allies alike.

Even if the courts and Congress don't let him get away with all this, the worrying factor is that when international commitments and state sovereignty are wantonly disregarded by the president of the United States, it signals to the world that good faith in international relations is freely disposable. If Canada's longstanding friendship, good neighbourliness and a spate of treaties count for nothing to the Trump White House, what reliance can other countries place on the word of Washington.

But even as we head into dark, uncharted territory, there's a degree of comfort in the fact that there are many in the U.S., including in Congress and in the business community, who don't share Mr. Trump's approach to international affairs. What is certain, too, is that Canada, a great liberal democracy, will not be the 51st state when Mr. Trump leaves office four years hence. What may be safely predicted as well is that the bilateral relationship will recover and that mutual respect, accommodation and good faith will be restored in dealings between the two countries.
