

Cory Morgan: Smith's Go-It-Alone Efforts on US Relationship-Building Could Have Different Results

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Canadian and U.S. flags are seen flying near Parliament Hill in Ottawa on March 22, 2023. The Canadian Press/Adrian Wyld



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Commentary

Since assuming office, Alberta Premier Danielle Smith has been prioritizing the development of ties with American counterparts. Alberta maintains an [office in Washington](#) and has recently become the only Canadian province in a [coalition of state governors](#) for energy security.

Smith will be heading to Washington to attend an inauguration event for President-elect Donald Trump this January, and now has said the

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province will be taking on the role of patrolling the border with Montana. Smith's proactive approach to building a relationship with the United States could very well shield Alberta from much of a fallout from a budding trade war and potential tariffs. But it could also fracture Canada's already delicate state of national unity.



The Trudeau government has said it is taking Trump's threat of imposing 25 percent tariffs seriously. A rare and rushed first



ministers' meeting was held to discuss a national response to the threatened tariffs, but the premiers didn't emerge from the event with a unified plan. Canadian leaders understand the urgency of dealing with the challenge, as a 25 percent tariff on Canadian exports would drive the nation into a deep recession. Every province is dependent upon trade with Canada's southern neighbour.

The border between Alberta and Montana spans 300 kilometres across some desolate areas. It is only lightly patrolled on either side, and the only barrier to crossing is a barbed wire fence in places. If a person was inclined to illegally enter the USA for migration or smuggling, it isn't a tough border to cross. Whether or not many illegal crossings are happening, however, remains to be seen. There is a perception that Canada is a jumping-off point for illegal immigrants and drug smuggling and Trump is using that as his basis for imposing tariffs. Canada must demonstrate border security measures to avoid a trade war.

Over 98 percent of Canadian crude oil exports go to the United States along with 45 percent of produced natural gas. Most of these products come from Alberta, and tariffs would devastate the province.

Alberta can make a convincing case to Trump to have oil and gas exempted from the proposed tariffs. Many American refineries are reliant on Canadian crude oil, and tariffs would lead to an [immediate price spike at the fuel pump](#) for American consumers. Trump promised to increase energy security and reduce energy costs for Americans by half within 18 months. If the price of gasoline and natural gas jumps shortly after Trump assumes office, it will be politically unpopular. If Trump can find a way to avoid tariffs on fuel while saving face, he will do so. Smith's proposal to secure the Alberta portion of the border offers Trump that out.

The significance of a province taking over the duty of international border patrols can't be overstated. Maintaining international border security is a federal role and assuming it provincially is a bold step toward provincial autonomy. Even Quebec at the height of its separatist movement never made such a move.

If Premier Smith's gambit is successful and Alberta avoids the imposition of tariffs but the tariffs are applied to other Canadian goods, regional tensions in Canada could increase. Imagine if Ontario and Quebec see their key manufacturing industries scaling down while Alberta weathers the storm without issue. The temptation to make a grab for Alberta's resource revenues by the federal government may become too much to resist. [It happened before](#), and it created Alberta's independence movement.

Alberta is making it clear it is protecting its own interests and doesn't care what Ottawa may think. [Smith just invoked the Sovereignty Act](#) to battle proposed federal emission caps. Further skirmishes with Ottawa will only bolster her support.

Whether it is fair or not, the federal government is painted into a corner with the incoming president. There's no love lost between Justin Trudeau and Donald Trump, but Trudeau must set his personal feelings aside and figure out how to pacify the incoming president.

Canada must act swiftly to ensure border issues are being addressed and convince President-elect Trump it's in the American interest to avoid tariffs on Canadian goods. If the Trudeau government fails in

this while Premier Smith succeeds in getting an exemption for oil and gas, Canada's economy will take a terrible hit along with national unity.

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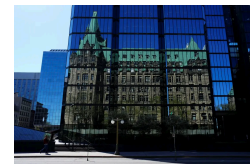
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