



Some Republicans push back against Trump's 'national security' tariffs on Canada

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In a rare move to fight Donald Trump, six Republican senators have introduced a bill that would give Congress the power to approve or reject the president's new steel and aluminum tariffs on Canada and other allies.

The bill represents the most significant legislative effort taken by a group of Republican senators to constrain Trump's economic powers. It reflects widespread unease among Republican senators with Trump's use of a "national security" provision to impose tariffs on friendly countries.

Still, it faces difficult odds.

Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell is opposed. Even Republicans uncomfortable with Trump's trade moves are reluctant to challenge a president who is overwhelmingly popular with party voters. And the bill would have to be endorsed by two-thirds of the Senate and House to override the likely Trump veto.

It is possible, though, that the bill could influence policy even if it does not become law. Politico reported that Republicans who oppose the tariffs but don't want to antagonize Trump "could back off if Trump throws them a bone by exempting Canada for now."

"If the legislation threatens to divide the caucus, and to drive a wedge between the caucus and the president in an election year, I can see McConnell and maybe (House Speaker Paul) Ryan going to the president and saying, 'You need to back off some of these tariffs to make this go away,'" said Dan Ikenson, director of trade policy studies at Washington's libertarian Cato Institute.

Trump does not currently appear to be in the mood to compromise. The Washington Post reported Wednesday that Trump has "mused about finding new ways to punish" Canada "in recent days, frustrated with the country's retaliatory trade moves."

The bill was unveiled on Wednesday by Republican Tennessee Sen. Bob Corker, five other Republican senators and four Democratic senators. Corker met on Monday with Canadian Foreign Affairs Minister Chrystia Freeland.

“Making claims regarding national security to justify what is inherently an economic question not only harms the very people we all want to help and impairs relations with our allies but also could invite our competitors to retaliate,” Corker said in a statement.

Corker said Trump had personally asked him not to go forward with the bill. Other Republicans criticized the Corker effort, saying Trump should be given a free hand on trade.

“Now is not the time to undercut President Trump’s ability to negotiate better trade deals. I will not support any efforts that weaken his position,” South Carolina Sen. Lindsey Graham said in a statement.

The intra-Republican battle demonstrates how Trump has changed and challenged a party that until his election stood for free trade. Numerous Republicans have been more willing to criticize Trump on trade than on any other issue.

The bill would require a congressional vote on any tariff the president wants to impose under the “Section 232” national security provision of the Trade Expansion Act of 1962, which Trump controversially used to impose a 25 per cent steel tariff and 10 per cent aluminum tariff on Canada, Mexico, the European Union and other foreign countries. At the moment, the president can decide on his own to use the national security provision.

The bill would be retroactive two years, so it would give Congress a vote on not only future tariff proposals but on these tariffs.

Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and Freeland have reacted with outrage to the use of a national security provision to hit Canada, a close military ally.

Trudeau called the move “an affront” to the Canadian soldiers who have fought and died with American soldiers. He has unveiled a suite of retaliatory tariffs on more than 100 American products, to take effect on July 1.

The Section 232 national security provision is written broadly. It allows the president to impose tariffs on the grounds that a weak domestic industry could harm U.S. national security; he does not have to explicitly deem a foreign country a security threat. Canada, though, argues that it is an insult regardless.

An Abacus poll released Thursday showed broad cross-partisan Canadian opposition to Trump’s tariffs — 79 per cent of respondents were opposed — and broad support for Trudeau’s response. Seventy-one per cent endorsed Trudeau’s retaliation, including 65 per cent of Conservative voters.