



## **Atkins: U.S. taxpayers ultimately will pay price for border wall**

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January 27, 2017

WASHINGTON — One way or another, it looks like American taxpayers will underwrite President Trump’s promised southern border wall.

Trump’s new style of Twitter diplomacy spurred a social media feud with Mexican President Enrique Pena Nieto, and Trump’s threat of a retaliatory 20 percent import tariff on our neighbor, if implemented, would cost American consumers and workers deeply.

The leaders were scheduled to meet in Washington Tuesday to talk trade and Trump’s repeated vow to pull out of NAFTA and instead negotiate individual bilateral deals between the United States and its trade partners. That promise had already soured the relationship, leading Pena Nieto to make clear that he wouldn’t sign any deal that leaves Mexico worse off than with NAFTA.

Still, there was hope that the two could strike a deal to modernize key parts of the nearly quarter-century-old free trade agreement, negotiated before the age of cellphones let alone Twitter, to bring it into the e-commerce age and ultimately benefit both countries.

“I was hopeful that they could have a good discussion of NAFTA and say it needs updating,” Simon Lester, a trade policy analyst with the Cato Institute told me.

But then, the border wall fight got in the way. Trump renewed his insistence that Mexico would pay for — or rather reimburse American taxpayers for — the \$12 billion to \$15 billion wall. If not, “it would be better to cancel the upcoming meeting,” Trump tweeted.

Pena Nieto shot back, tweeting in Spanish that he’d be staying home.

“It’s worrying,” Lester told me. “If the confrontation continues and NAFTA fully unravels ... the U.S. and Mexico are really going to be worse off.”

Then things seemed to get worse as the White House announced plans to fund the wall with a 20 percent tariff on all Mexican imports.

“By doing it that way we can do \$10 billion a year and easily pay for the wall,” White House spokesman Sean Spicer told reporters in a gaggle aboard Air Force One. “It clearly provides the funding and does so in a way that the American taxpayer is wholly respected.”

Except it doesn't: a large number of Mexican imports to America are goods like automobiles that contain American-made parts or are partially assembled here. A tax would put a huge burden on American businesses and imperil jobs. Plus, cost of the tariff would simply be passed on to U.S. consumers.

Perhaps that's why Spicer later told reporters the tariff plan was just one option being considered. But given Mexico's insistence it won't pay a dime for the wall, it's hard to see how American taxpayers won't get stuck with the bill.