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Trump's Two G7 Summits

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At the Group of Seven meeting in Biarritz, France, there are, in effect, two different summits under way—one that's happening in President Donald Trump's mind, and another that is actually happening on the ground; there's the summit Trump is trying to will into existence, and the summit unfolding in real time.

To hear Trump tell it, predictions that the weekend summit would be contentious were all wrong. Only the “Fake and Disgusting News” would conclude that his relations with the other leaders meeting in the coastal resort were “very tense,” he tweeted, when in fact, they were “getting along very well.” His counterparts, he insists, are coming forward and agreeing with him that it's a good idea to readmit Russia to the group, he said today (it was tossed out in 2014 after it annexed Crimea). He's hearing broad support for his trade dispute with China and a lunch visit yesterday with Emmanuel Macron was the best he's had yet with his French counterpart, he said.

Yet in none of these instances does Trump's version of events hold up. Pressed to name the other leaders who endorse the notion of letting Russia back in, for example, Trump demurred. “I could, but I don't think it's necessary,” he said. Trump's account is even at odds with what his own government has been telling reporters: One U.S. official said that the leaders agreed that the country wasn't yet deserving of an invitation, according to *The Wall Street Journal*. A foreign diplomat who represents one of the G7 nations told me, speaking on condition of anonymity, that Russia has done nothing since its banishment that would warrant its inclusion in a club of advanced economies with democratic systems. What's more, senior administration officials told reporters last week, before Trump left for France, that Russia hadn't even asked to be readmitted to the G7.

Trump's trade war with China has meanwhile taken an ominous turn that is rattling financial markets. On Friday, Beijing said it would impose tariffs on \$75 billion worth of U.S. goods, prompting Trump to retaliate with a new round of tariffs and a demand that U.S. companies pull out of China.

Escalating trade tensions have left U.S. allies unnerved, despite Trump's claim that his approach is winning approval at the G7. Boris Johnson, in his first face-to-face meeting with Trump since becoming prime minister, commended the overall state of the U.S. economy, but issued an unmistakable rebuke of Trump's trade practices. Johnson told reporters that “just to register the faint, sheeplike note of our view on the trade war, we're in favor of trade peace on the whole, and dialing it down if we can.” Asked if he would like to see “trade peace” with China, Johnson added that Britain has “profited massively” from free trade over the past two centuries. Sitting

across from a U.S. president who has proudly called himself “Tariff Man,” Johnson said that “we don’t like tariffs on the whole.”

Even as Trump gushed about his idyllic lunch with Macron, U.S. officials were telling reporters that France’s president was overly focused on “niche” issues, including climate change and the African economy.

While Trump has celebrated what he calls the cordial spirit at the summit, profound differences have emerged in public. At his meeting with Japanese Prime Minister Shinzō Abe, Trump said he wasn’t happy about North Korea’s missile tests, but also mentioned the “very nice letter” he’d gotten just last week from the country’s dictator, Kim Jong Un. He suggested Kim was right to be upset about the “war games” that South Korea, America’s longtime ally, had undertaken. North Korea, he said, hadn’t violated any “agreement.” Abe took a far different tone. North Korea’s launch of short-range missiles, he said, “clearly violates the relevant U.N. Security Council resolutions.”

Trump’s narrative encapsulates a larger problem: whether he can be taken at face value, means what he says, and knows his own mind. There was a heart-stopping moment during Trump’s meeting with Johnson when he signaled he was rethinking his hard-line approach to China. “Are you having second thoughts about it?” a reporter asked. “Yeah, sure. Why not? ... I have second thoughts about everything,” Trump said. That sounded like a retreat. Was Trump admitting that he wanted a way out of the spiraling trade dispute with China?

But, no. Or so it seems. The White House press secretary, Stephanie Grisham, soon put out a statement: Trump’s comment had been “greatly misinterpreted,” she said. His regret is only that “he’s not raising the tariffs higher.” Grisham’s statement elides an important question: Whose fault is it that Trump’s comment was “misinterpreted”?

How is anyone to know for sure when White House policy is articulated largely through bursts of 280-character tweets, interspersed with screeds about the latest personnel moves at Fox News? (Trump found time today to send out a tweet complaining about Fox’s hiring of the longtime Democratic operative Donna Brazile.)

If the past is any guide, there’s another possibility: Trump meant what he said and is in fact having second thoughts when it comes to China. That sort of thing has happened before. Let’s go back in time—all the way to last week. After *The Washington Post* wrote last Monday that Trump was considering a payroll tax cut as a way to boost the economy, the White House put out a statement denying that was the case. The following day, Trump told reporters in the Oval Office he was indeed mulling such a tax cut. By Wednesday, Trump said the idea was dead.

So who knows if Grisham’s statement is the last word or whether Trump, in the end, may pull back, as Johnson advised. At stake is more than just Trump’s reputation, but the fate of the world’s two largest economies. “It seems like he speaks off the cuff and says things and then that, in turn, becomes policy,” Simon Lester, a trade expert at the Cato Institute, told me. “Not because he put any thought into it initially, but just because he said something and then has to follow it through.”