



On Tariffs, Trump Is a One Trick Pony

Peter Suderman

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On a practical level, President Trump's newly announced tariffs against Turkey are doomed to fail. The tariffs, which Trump announced yesterday in response to Turkish aggression in Syria, put a stop to a trade deal in the works with the country, imposed sanctions on the country's national defense and energy sectors, and raised tariffs on Turkish steel to 50 percent. "I am fully prepared to swiftly destroy Turkey's economy if Turkish leaders continue down this dangerous and destructive path," Trump said as he announced the move. It was almost certainly an empty threat.

Turkey's steel industry primarily exports nearer to home, not to the U.S. And to the extent that Turkey does export steel to America, the tariffs—like all of Trump's tariffs—will function as taxes paid by Americans, making them unlikely to have a meaningful impact on Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's military decisions. The market reaction—relief—was telling.

Trump's tariffs are the diplomatic equivalent of busywork. He wanted to look like he was doing something, not actually do something. His decision was practically the definition of ineffective foreign policy.

Yet it's still telling that this—imposing steel tariffs—is what he chose to do. For Trump, tariffs are the key to solving nearly every issue that presents itself. The rise of China as an economic power? Tariffs. Immigrants coming across the southern border? Tariffs. The federal budget deficit? Probably tariffs. Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau is kind of smug and annoying? Yes, still: Tariffs.

Never mind that Trump and his pro-tariff advisers have repeatedly demonstrated that they have no earthly idea how international trade actually works. Never mind that tariffs have clearly hurt the U.S. economy and cost the very manufacturing jobs—including in steel manufacturing—that Trump says he wants to save. Never mind that Trump-style tariffs can presage global destabilization. Whatever the problem is, Trump is convinced that tariffs are the solution.

This is precisely the opposite of true. Tariffs do not, and have not, accomplished Trump's goals. As *Reason's* Eric Boehm has written over and over and over and over again, the trade wars have been a failure on nearly every level. Far from increasing America's economic power, Trump's trade war with China has weakened the U.S. economy, particularly in areas that are key to his political support. Although Trump credited threats of tariffs for Mexican concessions, the deal announced this summer consisted mostly of actions that had already been taken. Federal debt and deficits have continued to soar. Justin Trudeau is still kind of annoying. Rather than a solution to everything, tariffs are a solution to nothing.

So too will it be with Turkish steel: The tariffs will accomplish little or nothing except perhaps to further burden American consumers. There's a great slogan coined by Cato Institute scholar Scott Lincicome about how tariffs don't work: *Tariffs not only impose immense economic costs but also fail to achieve their primary policy aims and foster political dysfunction along the way.* You can get it on a shirt. Trump is proving that slogan right every single day.

That Trump is relying on tariffs in this case is even more galling, since Turkey's invasion of Syria was a direct result of Trump's decision to re-shuffle (no, not withdraw) American troops in the middle east. These tariffs are a non-solution to a deadly problem that Trump helped exacerbate by pulling out American troops without warning, in the most chaotic way possible. As Bonnie Kristian of Defense Priorities wrote here last week, the "lack of advance warning to the Kurdish forces for whom Trump previously expressed strong support means more bloodshed is likely than we might have seen with a better-planned, full U.S. exit." Brutal wars in the Middle East are yet another problem that tariffs won't solve.

But Trump is imposing tariffs here because they are the only response he knows. He's a one-trick pony, and it's a pretty stupid trick.