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Will America's Allies Turn On Trump at the G-7 Summit?

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Group of seven meetings, known as the G-7 Summit, are usually civil, even boring. They feature heavily scripted discussions with a bias toward consensus, so genuine news only rarely emerges. But the G-7 Summit, which began in Quebec on Friday, might yield a surprise or two. The most important issue is whether President Donald Trump's counterparts have grown some cojones and are willing to challenge the United States on economic and security issues.

The summit meetings began four decades ago. They bring together the leaders of Western industrialized states and typically focuses on economic issues. However, the participants are mostly American military allies. That means that the president will be meeting with his counterparts from Canada, France, Germany, Italy, Japan, and United Kingdom, as well as the European Union.

U.S. presidents haven't always gotten on well with allied leaders, but never have so many of their relationships—both personal and official—been so toxic. Before heading for Canada, President Trump complained about his hosts burning down the White House two centuries ago (actually, it was the British), while ignoring Americans' multiple, and largely disastrous, invasion attempts of Canada. He also sniped at Prime Minister Justin Trudeau for "being so indignant" (after all, the president never exhibits indignation, righteous or otherwise) and again complained about America's trade deficit, which economists recognize to be an accounting fiction.

In return, the Canadians and the Europeans have been unusually irritated, and perhaps willing to act on their anger. French President Emmanuel Macron, who enjoys one of the better personal relationships with President Trump, observed: "The American president may not mind being isolated, but neither do we mind signing a six country agreement if need be." After all, "these six countries represent values, they represent an economic market which has the weight of history behind it and which is now a true international force."

That it is, but words alone will not impress if the "international force" is not wielded effectively against Washington. As European Council President Donald Tusk acknowledged, "Washington may not be interested in reconfirming our shared commitment to the rules-based international

order.” The G-7 Summit’s formal agenda of economic prosperity, gender equality, environment issues and global security is likely to be overshadowed by the double-Trump assault on America’s allies.

The first is a trade war, one in which Washington is punishing American consumers and exporters along with foreign producers. Trump’s claim that U.S. national security was at stake—that, say, luxury German autos were going to destroy America—was understandably viewed as risible by nations which had backed Washington in war.

Canada and Europe plan to retaliate, thereby earning the president’s ire (since trade wars as supposed to be “easy to win”). Trump responded by threatening to impose additional tariffs. Neither side represents virginal innocence when it comes to trade, and the United States long has more success with negotiations than threats in lowering trade barriers worldwide.

The second fight is over Iran, after President Trump tossed the multinational accord reached with Iran and issued a diktat to Tehran which he expected the Europeans to back. They have been seeking to save the agreement, and had to abase themselves to request that Washington not do what seems inevitable, apply secondary sanctions on European firms that deal with Iran. If the administration treats allies as enemies it will turn European anger into rage.

However, that is not likely to concern the president. He has taken a negative measure of his counterparts, as was evident from his not so gentle shove of Montenegrin prime minister Dusko Markovic at last year’s NATO summit. Trade and Iran are not on the formal agenda, and the president is departing the G-7 meeting early, before the release of the joint statement. Afterward, he will be represented by a middling White House aide. President Trump doesn’t believe the allies matter and he treats them accordingly. Only if they decide on action that causes America economic pain, and him political difficulty, is he likely to take their interests into account.

Ironically, the Europeans could use to their advantage his unexpected call for the inclusion of Russia, which was tossed from the once-upon-a-time G-8 Summit four years ago. Despite the president’s personal overtures to Vladimir Putin, U.S. policy toward Moscow has been more hostile under his administration than under that of his predecessor. Also, Washington has consistently pressed the EU for tougher action against Russia.

On Thursday Putin exhibited more than a little schadenfreude when discussing the allied trade dispute: “In essence, these are sanctions. What, did they “annex Crimea,” as many of our partners say?” The president’s counterparts could invite Putin to appear and include him in any statement criticizing the United States on trade and Iran.

The ultimate question, however, is whether the allies will do anything other than talk. German chancellor Angela Merkel called on the Europeans to take the lead, but her government still refuses to fund and deploy a military capable of leading. And will the other G-7 Summit members do any better?

For instance, will they overtly cooperate with China and Russia over Iran? Will they work with those two states to create an alternative financial structure that insulates them from U.S. sanctions? Will the Canadians, Europeans and Chinese join together on trade questions against

Washington? Will the Europeans, and even Japan, develop an independent military capability that frees them from debilitating reliance on America?

So far, there is little indication that the other members of the G-7 are serious. So long as Washington can bully U.S. allies, it will do so. And not just the Trump administration. But President Trump could become the necessary catalyst for change.

The president is right to challenge even friendly nations when he believes U.S. interests to be at risk. However, to treat long-time allies dismissively, even contemptuously, sacrifices goodwill which someday might lead to the contemptuous treatment of Washington as well.

Until now the Europeans have shown no inclination that they will make the necessary sacrifices to seriously challenge the United States. But President Trump has shown himself to be a truly transformational leader. Perhaps he will goad America's traditional allies to take a big step into a new future—one that forces the United States to respond to group pressure. If so, this G-7 Summit could be the start of a serious allied challenge to Washington's leadership.

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