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On trade and North Korea, Trump tries to play disrupter

Ishaan Tharoor

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The battle lines are drawn. After the Trump administration moved to impose tariffs on steel and aluminum imports from U.S. allies in Europe and North America, retaliatory measures were announced and angry messages sent.

On Saturday, finance ministers from the six other Group of Seven member nations issued a stern warning to their American counterpart, Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin, expressing their “unanimous concern and disappointment” with the United States.

“We’re concerned that these actions are actually not conducive to helping our economy, they actually are destructive, and that is consistently held across the six countries,” said Canadian Finance Minister Bill Morneau, whose country will host Trump and other G-7 leaders in Quebec beginning Friday.

The French finance minister described the bloc as the “G-6 plus one,” underscoring the anger with Washington. “I’ve been to these meetings for a long time,” observed Japanese Finance Minister Taro Aso. “But this is a very rare case where opposition against the United States was unanimous.”

When you’re almost 800 Billion Dollars a year down on Trade, you can’t lose a Trade War! The U.S. has been ripped off by other countries for years on Trade, time to get smart!

The Trump administration insists the backlash is overblown, arguing that Trump's moves are a long-overdue “rebalancing” of global trade. But the consensus among most experts and U.S. firms is that the tariffs will backfire; a trade war will raise costs, hurt job growth and damage the U.S. economy.

“This will have an economic bite, and it will last a long time,” Adam Posen, president of the Peterson Institute for International Economics, told my colleagues. “It will be hard to establish trust in the U.S. again, and all the uncertainty will drive down investment and productivity.”

The political cost may be even steeper. Washington's European Union and NAFTA partners have been stung by Trump's dubious decision to label their exports as national-security threats. “Trump’s actions create a feeling of chaos and lawlessness. America is no longer abiding by basic due process and commitments made to other nations,” Jennifer Hillman, a former commissioner at the U.S. International Trade Commission, told The Post.

“Veterans of trade policy worry that tensions will further escalate, putting existing trade agreements in peril and the future of the World Trade Organization, the group that the United States helped establish in 1995 to adjudicate the rules of global trade, in doubt,” reported my colleagues Heather Long and Steven Mufson.

The perception of “chaos” is hardly restricted to the White House's views on trade. As Daniel Ikenson of the libertarian Cato Institute noted, the United States and foreign nations “remain exposed to the whims of an unorthodox president who precariously steers policy from one extreme to the other, keeping us in a perpetual state of uncertainty.”

One of the most glaring examples of uncertainty is Trump's diplomacy with North Korea. The pariah nation stands to gain significantly from a Trump summit with Kim Jong Un that Trump pushed for, later canceled in a fit of pique and now has reinstated after a visit from a high-ranking North Korean official that included an Oval Office photo-op.

Critics of Trump's softening toward North Korea, including a significant number of Republican lawmakers, resent this cuddliness with the apparatchiks of a totalitarian, nuclear-armed rogue state. (From threatening Kim with annihilation just months ago, the White House may even be seeking ways to pay for his accommodation in Singapore.) Experts warn that the Trump administration is giving Kim the platform of international legitimacy he and his forefathers long desired.

“The top-line ambition of North Korea is respect through diplomatic normalization, an end to the political pressure and economic pressure tactics to change their nation, and acceptance as they are into the international system,” said Frank Jannuzi, who made three trips to North Korea while working as a Democratic aide on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, to my colleague Karen DeYoung.

For Kim, a potential meeting with an American president would be a historic first for his country and a validation of the saber-rattling and nuke-building that led to this point. Some analysts suggest he may not seek deep economic concessions from Washington, the real reward being the meeting itself. “If the state is stronger and more powerful,” Daniel Pinkston of Troy University's campus in Seoul told the New York Times, “then the state is better positioned to pursue and achieve other goals, whatever they might be, including economic development.” For that reason, Pinkston argued that American attempts to achieve their goal of complete and verifiable “denuclearization” was a pipe dream. “It’s like trying to convince a devout Christian

that the pathway to enlightenment and eternal life is to abandon Jesus for something else,” he said.

The mere threat of a valedictory photo-op deterred previous American presidents from meeting their North Korean counterparts. But it hasn't thwarted Trump — indeed, it seems to be a driving motivation for him, as well.

“Trump views the photos as a victory, too — a symbol that he is willing to discard the diplomatic conventions that have limited his predecessors and stymied their attempts to curb North Korea’s nuclear program,” wrote The Post's White House correspondent David Nakamura. “White House aides said Trump’s sudden decision in March to agree to the summit was made with the confidence that his own negotiating skills would quickly pay greater dividends than three decades of failed lower-level talks.”

Trump's zeal to cast himself as the great disrupter of the global status quo — from courting Pyongyang to systematically attacking the American-led international order — may be the easiest way to understand his administration's foreign policy. But its far-reaching effects are still difficult to measure.

Trump and Kim “will announce they have looked into each other’s eyes and found each other trustworthy,” said Daniel Russel, a former Obama administration official, to The Post. “And they’ll announce they have decided to direct their deputies to begin a negotiating process. But when you scrape the gold paint off, lo and behold, there’s not much there.”

American allies in Europe and North America, preparing for an unprecedented trade war, can only hope that the White House's moves against them have such a small impact.