

For Trump, Failure Is the Only



Option

By **Paul Krugman**

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So Donald Trump went to a NATO summit, insulted our allies, then made the absurd demand not just that they increase defense spending — which they should — but that they raise it to [4 percent of G.D.P.](#), much higher than the [bloated military spending](#) in his own budget. He then claimed, falsely, to have won major concessions, and graciously declared that it is “presently unnecessary” to consider quitting the alliance.

Was there anything our allies could have done that would have mollified him? The answer, surely, is no. For Trump, disrupting NATO doesn’t seem to be a means to an end; it’s an end in itself.

Does all of this sound familiar? It’s basically the same as the story of the escalating trade war. While Trump rants about other countries’ unfair trade practices — a complaint that has some validity for China, although virtually none for Canada or the European Union — he hasn’t made any coherent demands. That is, he has given no indication what any of the countries hit by his tariffs could do to satisfy him, leaving them with no option except retaliation.

So he isn’t acting like someone threatening a trade war to win concessions; he’s acting like someone who just wants a trade war. Sure enough, he’s reportedly threatening to [pull out of the World Trade Organization](#), the same way he’s suggesting that the U.S. might pull out of NATO.

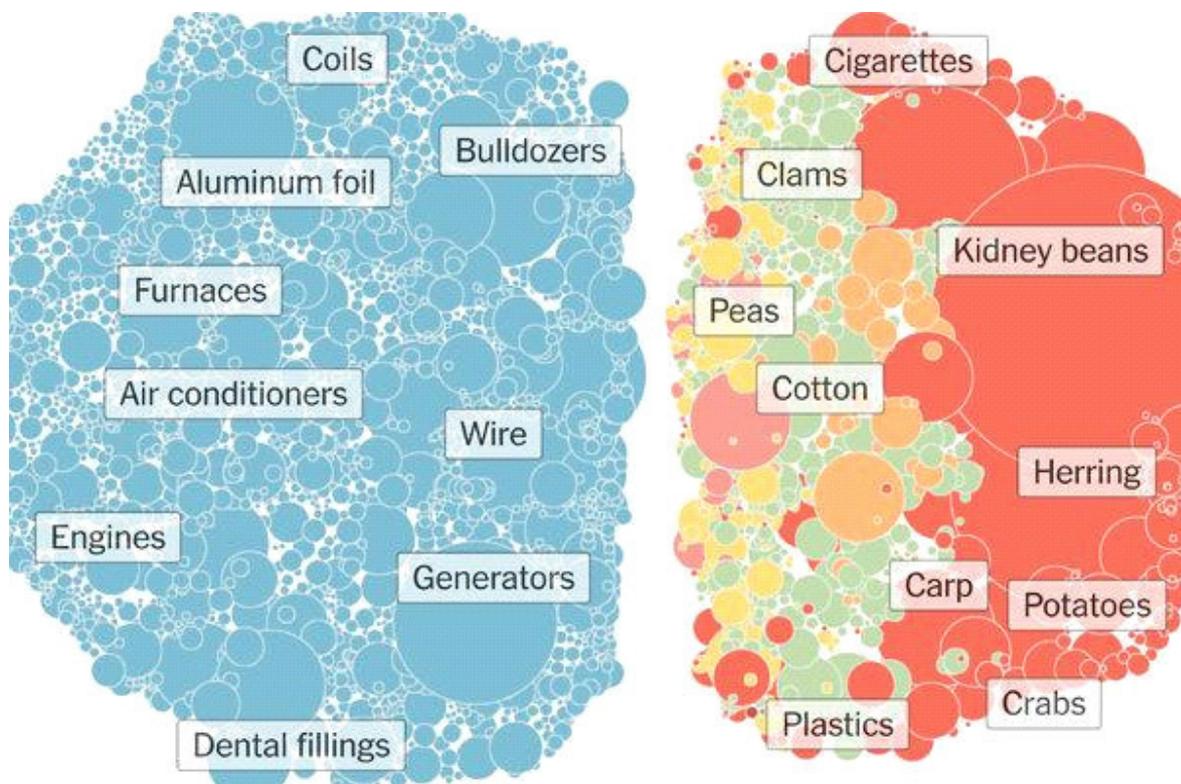
It’s all of a piece. Whatever claims Trump makes about other countries’ misbehavior, whatever demands he makes on a particular day, they’re all in evident bad faith. Mr. Art of the Deal doesn’t want any deals. He just wants to tear things down.

The institutions Trump is trying to destroy were all created under U.S. leadership in the aftermath of World War II. Those were years of epic statesmanship — the years of the Berlin airlift and the Marshall Plan, in which America showed its true greatness. For having won the war, we chose not to behave like a conqueror, but instead to build the foundations of lasting peace.

Thus the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade, signed in 1947 — at a time of overwhelming U.S. economic dominance — didn’t seek a privileged position for

American products, but instead created rules of the game to promote prosperity around the world. Similarly, NATO, created in 1949 — at a time of overwhelming U.S. military dominance — didn't seek to lock in our hegemony. Instead, it created a system of mutual responsibility that encouraged our allies, including our defeated former enemies, to see themselves as equals in preserving our mutual security.

One way to say this is that America tried to create an international system reflecting our own ideals, one that subjected powerful countries — ourselves included — to rule of law, while protecting weaker nations from bullies. Small countries can and do win W.T.O. cases against big countries; small members of NATO receive the same unconditional security guarantees as major powers.



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And what Trump is trying to do is undermine that system, making bullying great again.

What's his motivation? Part of the answer is that anything that weakens the Western alliance helps Vladimir Putin; if Trump isn't literally a Russian agent, he certainly behaves like one on every possible occasion.

Beyond that, Trump obviously dislikes anything that smacks of rule of law applying equally to the weak and the strong. At home, he pardons criminal bigots while ripping children away from their parents. In international

relations, he consistently praises brutal strongmen while heaping scorn on democratic leaders.

So of course he hates the international institutions created by an infinitely wiser generation of U.S. statesmen, who understood that it was in America's own interest to use its power with respect and restraint, to bind itself by rules in order to win the world's trust.

He may complain that other countries are cheating and taking advantage of America, that they're imposing unfair tariffs or failing to pay their share of defense costs. But as I said, those claims are made in bad faith — they're excuses, not real grievances. He doesn't want to fix these institutions. He wants to destroy them.

Will anything put a check on Trump's destructive instincts? You might have thought that Congress would place some limits, that there were at least some responsible, patriotic Republican lawmakers left. But there aren't.

Alternatively, you might have thought that big business, which is deeply invested, literally, in the existing world order would protest effectively. So far, however, it has been utterly ineffectual. And while talk of trade war sometimes causes the stock market to wobble, as far as I can tell, investors still aren't taking this seriously: They imagine that Trump will bluster and tweet for a while, then accept some cosmetic policy changes and call it a win.

But that kind of benign outcome looks increasingly unlikely, because Trump won't take yes for an answer. He doesn't want negotiations with our allies and trading partners to succeed; he wants them to fail. And by the time everyone realizes this, the damage may be irreversible.

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