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For Europe, everything has changed



President Trump, British Prime Minister Theresa May, center, and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, left, participate in a meeting during the NATO in Brussels on May 25. (Thierry Charlier/Associated Press)

by [Anne Applebaum](#)

Just returned from Europe. Trip was a great success for America. Hard work but big results!

— [Donald Trump](#), Sunday morning

For more than four months, the White House has confirmed no European ambassadors, filled no high-level diplomatic jobs and given no indication that it ever will. Occasional envoys, the vice president and defense secretary among them, have floated across the Atlantic, carrying messages of general reassurance. They have reconfirmed America's commitment to NATO, spoken of old ties and old alliances, hinted and winked that nothing has changed.

Europeans listened and pretended to believe them. Sure, one of them told me after hearing the vice president speak in February in Munich, "[all of that's true until the guy's next tweet.](#)" But in the space of two short days last week, President Trump himself ended those months of uncertainty without a tweet. Now we know: The envoys were unreliable. And everything really has changed.

What actually happened in Belgium and Italy? [Having declared](#) in Saudi Arabia that he would not "lecture" Arab leaders about human rights, Trump arrived in Brussels and began to lecture America's closest allies, accusing them of owing "[massive amounts of money](#)" to NATO and U.S. taxpayers. This made no sense: NATO is not a club like Mar-a-Lago with annual dues. But it was a clear sign, at last, of what many had suspected all along: Trump prefers the company of dictators who flatter him to democrats who treat him as an equal.

A few hours later, at a meeting on trade, [Trump complained](#) that Germany is "bad" because of the "millions of cars they are selling to the U.S." and appeared to want to rewrite America's trade deal with Germany. This made no sense either: As a part of the European Union, Germany does not negotiate its own trade deals. Also, German companies make "millions of cars" inside the United States, about the same number as they sell. But the comments made it clear: The days when the United States led the world in trade are over too.

At no point did the president seem to understand his role of alliance leader. Pressed to commit to a climate-change treaty, [he tweeted](#), "I'll be making my final decision on the Paris Accord next week!" — almost as if this were a television series that relied on cliffhangers to keep people watching. Proving that he still sees the world through the eyes of a property developer, he complained to the Belgian prime minister about European regulations that had [slowed down the construction of one of his golf courses](#). Before the NATO summit photograph, Trump shoved aside the Montenegrin prime minister to put himself in front, because that's what boorish celebrities do.

At no point did the president even appear to understand the issues at stake either. During his NATO speech, he failed to mention Article 5, the clause that commits NATO members to defending one another if attacked. Later he declared that his trip would pave the way for “peace through strength,” though it was clear he had no idea what that phrase, used by Ronald Reagan in the 1980s, actually means: “We’re gonna have a lot of strength, and we’re gonna have a lot of peace,” [he explained](#).

After the visit ended, presidential aides rushed in to explain what the president meant to say. [H.R. McMaster](#), the national security adviser, immediately declared that Trump had supported Article 5. But this time no one pretended to believe him.

As a result of this trip, American influence, always exercised in Europe through mutually beneficial trade and military alliances, is at its rockiest in recent memory. The American-German relationship, the core of the transatlantic alliance for more than 70 years, has just hit a new low: On Sunday, [the German chancellor](#) told a sympathetic crowd that Germany could no longer depend on America, given what she had “experienced in the last few days.” The Russian government, which has long sought to expel the United States from the continent, is overjoyed: On Russian television, Trump was said to have turned NATO into a “[house of cards](#).”

A “great success for America”? If that was “success,” then I’d hate to see failure.

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