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Trump is so obsessed with winning that he might make America lose

In his zero-sum universe, you're either victorious or you're defeated

by [Ian Bremmer](#)

It is perhaps his most essential quality: President Trump is determined to triumph — and to see America triumph alongside him. “I win against China. You can win against China if you’re smart,” he [said](#) at a campaign event in July 2015. “Vast numbers of manufacturing jobs in Pennsylvania have moved to Mexico and other countries. That will end when I win!” he [tweeted](#) during the campaign. “China, Japan, Mexico, Brazil, these countries are all taking our jobs, like we’re a bunch of babies. That will stop,” he once [promised](#).

In Trump’s view of the world, there is a finite amount of everything — money, security, jobs, victories — and nothing can be shared. He previewed this past week’s [announcement](#) of steel tariffs when he [said](#) during the campaign that foreign smelters are “killing our steelworkers and steel companies.” He [promised](#) during his State of the Union address to protect “our” citizens over the undocumented “dreamers.” In other words, the United States, and all of its inhabitants, are in a zero-sum competition over everything, all the time. And you’re either victorious or defeated. It’s a universe where the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must, as Thucydides said.

The problem is that the triumphs that Trump craves — strength, safety, prosperity — cannot be achieved alone. They require friends and allies, and they require the president to see those people as partners, not competitors. But Trump doesn’t know how to do that, which makes everyone suspicious; other governments don’t like to be punching bags, the only role he appears to envision for them. Mutual distrust imperils the collaboration the United States needs to succeed. Which is to say, Trump’s determination to win could easily position the country to lose.

Perhaps it’s unrealistic to expect Trump, the first person elected U.S. president without having served in government or the military, to have a carefully considered view of America’s role in the world. But a year into his presidency, it’s clear that his core beliefs come from the business world, where the focus is on the bottom line. In real estate, relationships often take the form of one-off transactions: You can [cheat](#) people you’ll never do business with again. A dollar off the price is a dollar you keep, and Trump has no doubt made a lot of dollars that way.

As president, he seems to have a similar view — that U.S. interests rise only at the expense of others. Winners have trade surpluses, and losers have trade deficits. Jobs move from losing countries to winning countries. The United States is the biggest economy with the biggest military, and therefore the United States has leverage to get the best deals. If we don't emerge gooder globalist who didn't put America first. NAFTA, for instance, was Bill Clinton's agreement (even though it began under George H.W. Bush). And "Iran was on its last legs . . . until the U.S. came along and gave it a life-line in the form of the Iran Deal," Trump [tweeted](#) a year ago. The world is a tough place filled with tough people who watch you every second for a chance to take advantage, he believes — and the American president is elected to [care](#) about Pittsburgh, not Paris.

Washington has the most leverage when it deals with countries one on one, which is why, he [says](#), "we need bilateral trade deals," not "another international agreement that ties us up and binds us down." To abide by the same rules as less-powerful countries would be to sublimate American interests to those of lesser nations.

The world's wealth is like a pie, and it's the president's responsibility to ensure that the strongest country gets the biggest piece. Trump seeks to [begin](#) negotiations with a threat that forces the other side to defend its smaller piece. He pledges to tear up NAFTA, rip up the Iran nuclear deal and revisit America's relationship with NATO — unless he gets concessions. And he gains advantage not by telling the truth but by saying things he believes will boost his bargaining power and sell his vision: China has been allowed to "rape our country." Mexico is deliberately exporting criminals into the United States, but the wall will bring that to a stop. U.S. allies are laughing at American taxpayers.

Trump casts alliances as partnerships that burden strong nations with free-riding "allies," such as NATO members that don't spend enough on defense, and the governments of Japan and South Korea, which expect the United States to protect them from China. This is where critics who say he's an isolationist [go awry](#). The man who launched missiles at Syria to punish its violations of a chemical weapons treaty is not opposed to intervention in other countries. He's just an alliance-hating unilateralist.

It's also clear from his speeches, before and after the election, that he [sees](#) three kinds of immigrants: smart guys from smart countries, like Norway, undeserving charity cases from "shithole" countries and [terrorists/gang members](#) who threaten ordinary Americans. None of them could ever become ordinary Americans. These are people who want to join the club without paying the membership fee.

The zero-sum cosmology touches everything. Obamacare supposedly sticks us with the bill for people who should pay for their own insurance — or a find a job that provides it. Trump even told The Washington Post's Michael Kranish and Marc Fisher, authors of the biography "[Trump Revealed](#)," that [he doesn't exercise](#), because "the human body was like a battery, with a finite amount of energy, which exercise only depleted."

There are no permanent allies or permanent enemies, only permanent interests. It doesn't matter whether another country is a democracy or a dictatorship, whether it's stood with the United

States or against it; [Australia](#), Germany and Mexico have all been insulted for seeing things differently than the president does. Yesterday and tomorrow don't matter unless they help get a better deal today. Everything else is weak-kneed nonsense.

There are kernels of truth that undergird Trump's view. It's a disgrace that the United States is one of just five of NATO's 29 members to spend 2 percent of their gross domestic product on defense, as required by the alliance's rules. "America First" is a sensible response to his predecessors, who sometimes behaved as if America was becoming stronger in the world; it is not, and our policy should reflect that. China is more a strategic competitor than a real partner linked by shared values. Trade does produce winners and losers, as falling barriers allow companies to move jobs to places where wages are lower. A [study](#) published by the Pew Research Center in December 2015 found that "after more than four decades of serving as the nation's economic majority, the American middle class is now matched in number by those in the economic tiers above and below it." That's a real problem, and Trump is right to point it out.

But his belief that winners win and losers lose has led him toward many unforced errors. He could have demanded that NATO members pay more without signaling that he might abandon the mutual-defense agreement that undergirds a treaty to contain Russia. "America First" makes sense only if Americans are willing to lead by example, showing the world that democracy is best by moving beyond petty partisanship to build the compromises on which progress depends. Other nations might be more wowed by "America First" if it invested more money in education, rebuilt infrastructure and focused exports on technology, energy and food. People elsewhere must believe that America is too important to fail.

The president doesn't see that opponents and collaborators are often the same people. Even if China is a competitor, it also wants to eliminate terrorist threats in Pakistan and Afghanistan. It wants [clean energy](#). It wants global economic stability. Meanwhile, 41 million American jobs [depend](#) on trade, according to the U.S. Chamber of Commerce. Trade [provides](#) middle-class Americans with more than a quarter of their purchasing power, and the Commerce Department reports that about 98 percent of the 300,000 U.S. companies that [export](#) are small and medium-size businesses. Trade lowers prices for American consumers. Protectionism may temporarily protect the losers by shielding them from competition, but it creates no long-term winners.

The zero-sum approach may be most dangerous in the realm of international relations. Americans need foreigners to [loan](#) our government money. They need goods and valuable commodities to move safely around the globe. They can't defend themselves against terrorists unless other governments share information with U.S. intelligence agencies. The United States can't grow its economy in an unstable world, because Americans need people in other countries to buy our products and sell us things in return.

Relations among nations are not like real estate deals. The president has to negotiate with the same people again the next month, and they'll remember how they've been treated. Israel's Benjamin Netanyahu never forgave President Barack Obama for openly criticizing his approach to settlement-building; imagine how every other leader feels about being constantly humiliated by Trump. Other countries form judgments about whether American promises are credible and whether they can trust the president. Trump says he's [willing](#) to talk with North Korea about its

nuclear program, but surely Kim Jong Un is watching as Trump threatens to shred the Iran nuclear agreement. Why not just deal with other countries? There are many options.

The biggest is China. The Chinese are writing checks. They're investing in other nations and making deals that serve China's interests. Its economy is just two-thirds the size of ours, but its government is working to create economic links — and political dependence — across the world, even as Trump says we need to focus our attention domestically. The Belt and Road Initiative, China's plan to [blaze](#) new commercial trails and cement new political ties via infrastructure investment in dozens of countries, is seven times larger than the Marshall Plan when adjusted for inflation. More than 120 nations already trade more with China than with the United States. And they're not just developing countries. China is [investing](#) in smaller European Union members like Hungary and Greece to alter official E.U. attitudes toward Beijing. That's why the Trans-Pacific Partnership, which Trump quashed, was more than just a trade deal. By joining, Trump could have expanded U.S. ties with many of China's neighbors, governments that fear overreliance on China's goodwill for future growth.

Trump's win-or-lose philosophy is most confused when it comes to immigration. Foreigners who want to become Americans are not charity cases. They participate in the labor force [at higher rates](#) (73.4 percent, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics) than native-born Americans. A higher percentage of immigrants than native-born Americans [own](#) small businesses. That's reality, not soft-headed sentiment, and Trump's tendency to [hire](#) foreign guest workers over Americans at his own properties suggests that he understands something about how hard they work.

Immigrants boost growth and strengthen the social safety net. They pay their way. The undocumented [contribute](#) \$13 billion to the nation's retirement fund each year and get just \$1 billion in return. Immigrants are also innovative: "More than three out of every four patents at the top 10 patent-producing US universities (76%) had at least one foreign-born inventor," according to a 2012 [study](#).

But Trump has made clear that he doesn't want foreigners in this country, and the world is listening. Since he became president, tourism [has fallen](#) 4 percent, with a resulting loss of 40,000 jobs. Foreign applications to U.S. universities are [down](#), too.

The president is obsessed by losers. (During a spat, he [reportedly told](#) the acting FBI director, Andrew McCabe, to ask his wife, who'd lost a state legislative election, how it feels to be a loser.) But he doesn't seem to know that some of our country's greatest success stories began in failure. Thomas Edison famously erred 1,000 times on the way to inventing the light bulb — it "was an invention with 1,000 steps," he said. Henry Ford went broke repeatedly before he succeeded. Steve Jobs, a college dropout, was fired from the company he founded. Even Trump's own businesses have [gone](#) bankrupt.

Ultimately, America can't win without allies. To isolate countries like Iran and North Korea, the president needs partners who will help. To pressure China to change its behavior on trade or North Korea, he needs friends in other governments. If he wants to track terrorists before they try to enter the United States, he needs support from foreign intelligence services. During the Cold

War, the U.S. strategy centered on securing the cooperation of friendly governments and winning the hearts and minds of people in communist countries through the promise of greater personal freedom and a better quality of life. Today, the United States doesn't have that kind of leverage, and Trump's aggressive criticism of other countries, including allies, poisons public attitudes toward the United States and makes it harder for foreign leaders to [cooperate](#) with Washington publicly.

A Pew survey [shows](#) international confidence in Trump and his leadership at some of the lowest levels since Pew began tracking the U.S. image abroad in 2002. Almost three-quarters of those surveyed said they have little to no confidence in Trump. In a world where plenty of countries have the strength to say no to U.S. power, that matters.

The good news is that the United States still enjoys extraordinary advantages. It's about to push past the Saudis [in oil production](#). It's the world's No. 1 producer of food. Its universities are among the best. Its consumer market is the largest. It's a center of innovation. While some countries are still reliant on pulling wealth from the ground and shipping it out, most of the world's people are now connected by gadgets designed in America.

But these are consequences of smart investments and sound policies, not immutable and permanent facts of nature. We got here by making the best of complicated situations with multiple players whose interests overlap with our own. It is not, in the end, a zero-sum world, and if Trump wants to make the best deals, he'll need to learn a few words: respect, cooperation and compromise. These ideas won't fire up a campaign rally. But they might help build an American strategy that works.



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