

Trump barrels into G-7 summit, ready to fight US allies

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Washington: Bruising for a fight, President Donald Trump barrelled into the Group of Seven summit Friday, confronting long-time U.S. allies over a burgeoning trade dispute and insisting Russia should be brought back into the fold.

Trump joined the leaders of major industrialized nations in an idyllic Canadian resort town after days of escalating conflict over new U.S. tariffs he slapped on imports of steel and aluminium. Facing pointed criticism from increasingly disillusioned allies, he punched back, uncowed by the growing global outcry.

“Look, all of these countries have been taking advantage of the United States on trade,” Trump told reporters as he left the White House, repeating his longstanding complaints about trade deficits and tariffs. He declared, “We have to straighten it out.”

However, Trump did seek to lower the temperature after his arrival. He bantered easily with Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, joking that the neighbouring leader had “agreed to cut all tariffs and all trade barriers.” And he emphasized a “good relationship” with French President Emmanuel Macron, saying they sometimes have a “little test” on trade, but predicting a positive outcome.

Still, the fundamental differences remained clear. Trump again railed against trade deficits with other countries and repeated that he may pursue separate negotiations with Canada and Mexico to replace the North American Free Trade Agreement.

Both sides suggested some progress in NAFTA talks, with White House spokeswoman Sarah Huckabee Sanders saying they were “close to a deal,” though adding there was also discussion of a bilateral deal. A Canadian official said the leaders discussed accelerating the talks.

Macron said there had been “open and direct” discussions on trade, adding that he thought there was a way to get a “win-win” outcome, though details remained unclear.

Before arriving at the meeting of the group, which some suggest Trump is pushing from the Group of Seven into “G-6 plus one,” he further stirred the pot by asking why Russia was excluded.

“They should let Russia come back in because we should have Russia at the negotiating table,” he said.

Russia was ousted from the elite group in 2014 as punishment for President Vladimir Putin’s annexation of Crimea and support for pro-Russian separatists in Ukraine. In the U.S., special counsel Robert Mueller is investigating whether Trump’s campaign colluded with Russia in a bid to sway the 2016 presidential election in his favour.

Canadian Foreign Minister Chrystia Freeland said the Russia issue “has” been raised around the G-7 table, though she said there have been “some direct conversations in bilateral meetings.” She added

“There are no grounds whatsoever for bringing Russia with its current behaviour back into the G-7.”

Despite the tension, the president was greeted cordially by Trudeau as he arrived at the annual gathering, held this year at a picturesque Quebec resort. Other members of the Group of Seven are France, Italy, Japan, Germany and Britain. The European Union also attends.

Trump showed up late and will leave early on Saturday, heading to Singapore for his meeting with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un. He spent Friday participating in the rituals of the G-7, including the formal greeting by host Trudeau, a group photo in front of the sparkling St. Lawrence River and a working lunch of Arctic char and buckwheat salad.

Over the course of his presidency, Trump has inflamed allies with his isolationist policies, including withdrawing the U.S. from the Paris climate accord and the international Iran nuclear agreement. Under Trump, the United States has abandoned its traditional role in the G-7 as an advocate for freer global trade, instead pushing more protectionist policies.

“The rules-based international order is being challenged, not by the usual suspects but by its main architect and guarantor: The United States,” said European Council President Donald Tusk.

Relations have hit such a low point that a key question now is whether the seven countries can agree on a joint statement of priorities at the end of the meeting. Macron said Thursday on Twitter, “The American President may not mind being isolated, but neither do we mind signing a 6-country agreement if need be.” Trump said he thinks the group will produce a joint statement.

In the days leading up to the summit, Trudeau and Macron have severely criticized Trump’s new tariffs, which critics say threaten to drive up prices for American consumers and companies and heighten uncertainty for businesses and investors around the globe.

But Trump, who frames his trade moves as a fulfilment of his campaign promises, is vowing to hold firm, tweeting Thursday: “Take down your tariffs & barriers or we will more than match you!”

The French president did have some private time with Trump before the summit officially started. Macron tweeted a short video of the two together, saying: “Sharing, reaching out, always, to promote the interests of the French people, and all those who believe in a world we can build together.”

Prior to leaving Washington, Trump appeared unenthusiastic about the summit, complaining to aides about having to attend, particularly with his Singapore sit-down with Kim right around the corner. On Friday morning, he appeared in no hurry to leave for Canada, walking out of the White House more than half an hour late and answering questions from reporters for nearly 20 minutes.

To Trump’s suggestion that Russia be welcomed back to the group, allies had mixed responses.

In Paris, Macron’s office said it wouldn’t make sense and pointed out that the latest country to impose economic sanctions on Russia was the U.S. Italy’s new premier, Giuseppe Conte, tweeted that he agreed with Trump, saying: “Russia should go back into the G-8. In the interest of all.”

Tusk was not convinced.

“Let’s leave seven as it is,” Tusk said. “It’s a lucky number.”

Russia seemed unconcerned. State news agencies quoted Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov as saying, "We are putting the emphasis on other formats."

- AP