

Trump Threatens Tariffs Over Immigration, Drugs and Greenland

The president is increasingly threatening other countries with tariffs for issues that have little to do with trade.



By Ana Swanson and Alan Rappeport

Ana Swanson and Alan Rappeport covered trade wars in the first Trump administration. They reported from Washington.

Jan. 28, 2025

In his first week in office, President Trump tried to browbeat governments across the world into ending the flow of drugs into America, accepting planes full of deported migrants, halting wars and ceding territory to the United States.

For all of them, he deployed a common threat: Countries that did not meet his demands would face stiff tariffs on products they send to American consumers.

Mr. Trump has long wielded tariffs as a weapon to resolve trade concerns. But the president is now frequently using them to make gains on issues that have little to do with trade.

It is a strategy rarely seen from other presidents, and never at this frequency. While Mr. Trump threatened governments like Mexico's with tariffs over immigration issues in his first term, he now appears to be making such threats almost daily, including on Sunday, when he said Colombia would face tariffs after its government turned back planes carrying deported immigrants.

“The willingness rhetorically to throw the kitchen sink and use the whole tool kit is trying to send the message to other countries beyond Colombia that they should comply and find ways to address these border concerns,” said Rachel Ziemba, an

adjunct senior fellow at the Center for a New American Security.

Last week, Mr. Trump threatened to put a 25 percent tariff on products from Canada and Mexico and a 10 percent tariff on Chinese products on Feb. 1 unless those countries did more to stop the flows of drugs and migrants into the United States. Previously, he threatened to punish Denmark with tariffs if its government would not cede Greenland to the United States and to impose levies on Russia if it would not end its war in Ukraine.

On Sunday afternoon, Mr. Trump wrote on social media that he would impose 25 percent tariffs on Colombia and raise them to 50 percent in one week. Within a few hours, the Colombian president, Gustavo Petro, said he would hit back with his own tariffs. But by Sunday night, the White House had released a statement saying that Mr. Petro had agreed to all of its terms, and that Mr. Trump would hold the threat of tariffs and sanctions “in reserve.”

That quick resolution may only further embolden Mr. Trump’s use of tariffs to extract concessions that have nothing to do with typical trade relations.

Speaking to House Republicans in Florida on Monday, Mr. Trump referenced his threat that countries like Colombia, Mexico and Canada reduce the flow of migrants into the United States or face tariffs.

“They’re going to take them back fast and if they don’t they’ll pay a very high economic price,” he said.

Ted Murphy, a lawyer at Sidley Austin who handles trade-related issues, said the tariffs would have been a significant blow to industries that rely on imports from Colombia, but that the implications of the threat were much broader.

“Tariffs could be used in response to almost anything,” he said.

Even having a free-trade agreement with the United States is no guarantee of safety: Colombia signed such a deal with the United States in 2011, while Mr. Trump himself signed the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement in 2020.

Mr. Trump is also not limiting himself to the trade-related laws he relied on to impose tariffs in his first term, Mr. Murphy said. For Colombia and for other nations, Mr. Trump has appeared willing to deploy a legal statute — the International Emergency Economic Powers Act of 1977, or IEEPA — that gives presidents broad powers to impose trade and sanctions measures if they declare a national emergency.

Mr. Murphy said the bar for Mr. Trump to declare a national emergency appeared to be “not very high.”

Governments in Mexico, Canada, Europe, China and elsewhere have prepared lists of retaliatory tariffs they can apply to American products if Mr. Trump decides to follow through with his own levies. But foreign officials seem well aware of the economic damage that cross-border tariffs would cause, and have tried to defuse the tensions to avoid a damaging trade war.

Kaja Kallas, the European Union’s top diplomat, said Monday that Europe needed to unite as the Trump administration threatens to usher in an era of policy changes, including tariffs.

“As the United States shifts to a more transactional approach, Europe needs to close ranks,” Ms. Kallas said, speaking in a news conference after a meeting of foreign ministers in Brussels.

“Europe is an economic heavyweight and geopolitical partner,” she added.

Presidential use of trade-related measures for matters unrelated to trade isn’t without precedent. Douglas A. Irwin, an economic historian at Dartmouth College, pointed out that President Richard Nixon conditioned the return of Okinawa to Japan on its agreeing to limit the amount of textiles it sent into the United States. President Gerald Ford signed the Jackson-Vanik Amendment, which linked granting the Soviet Union “most favored nation” trading status — and lower tariff rates — to it allowing Jews to emigrate.

Still, Mr. Irwin called Mr. Trump’s approach “unusual.”

“Trump is very overt and transactional in his approach,” he said.

In recent decades, presidents have been less willing to wield tariffs or other measures that would restrict trade, in part out of deference to the World Trade Organization. W.T.O. members, including the United States, have agreed to certain rules around when and how they impose tariffs on other countries within the organization.

The W.T.O. carves out exceptions for its members to act on issues of national security, and governments have used that exception more liberally in recent years when imposing tariffs or limiting certain kinds of trade.

Eswar Prasad, a trade policy professor at Cornell University, said that many administrations, including Joseph R. Biden Jr.’s, had used national security considerations “as a veil to implement tariffs and other protectionist measures without running afoul of W.T.O. rules.”

Although no U.S. president has wielded the threat of tariffs as Mr. Trump has, they have pressured other countries with other types of economic measures, like sanctions or embargoes. And in recent decades, U.S. presidents have been more willing to use trade as a carrot, rather than a stick, holding out the prospect of free trade deals and other preferential trade treatment for governments that support the country politically.

If Mr. Trump indeed goes through with his tariffs, it remains to be seen if U.S. courts ultimately decide to curtail them.

Peter Harrell, who served as White House senior director for international economics in the Biden administration, noted on social media that IEEPA had never before been used to impose the types of tariffs that Mr. Trump threatened on Colombia, Canada and Mexico. (Mr. Nixon did use a precursor statute, the Trading With the Enemy Act of 1917, to briefly impose a 10 percent universal tariff in 1971 to address the trade balance, unemployment and inflation.)

Mr. Harrell suggested that such an expansive interpretation of the law could face legal challenges. He said that he was “skeptical” that courts would allow Mr. Trump to use the legal statute to impose a broad global tariff, but more targeted tariffs, like those on Colombia, would be “a much closer and more interesting test case.”

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A version of this article appears in print on , Section A, Page 1 of the New York edition with the headline: Trump Threats Promise Tariffs For Any Cause