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Donald Trump claims that we are losing the trade war. He seems to believe that trade is a zero sum game in which one person's gain is exactly equal to another person's loss. Certainly, this framework works in many cases.

When the Razorbacks score a touchdown, they gain 6 points and their opponents give up 6 points. When a U.S. sprinter wins a race in the Olympics, a Chinese runner loses the race. Even back when humans lived in a hunter-gatherer society and foraged off the land, when one person took a piece of fruit off a tree, this fruit ceased to be available to anyone else.

Trade, however, is different because it does not involve winners and losers. When two countries trade with each other, they are both better off. This is a notion that is hard to grasp.

Many people believe that when the U.S. imports goods from another country, it does so because it is weak and cannot produce the good as well as the foreign country can, but this is not the case. For instance, consider the case of the U.S. and Vietnam. U.S. workers are more productive than Vietnamese workers because they are more educated and because they work in factories that have machines with more advanced technology.

In a day, a U.S. worker can produce more backhoes and more clothes than a Vietnamese worker.

Based on this, it seems the U.S. should not trade with Vietnam because they do not seem to bring much to the table. They cannot match our productivity. Zero sum thinking would suggest that we produce both backhoes and clothes in the United States in order to keep our jobs and business profits here. However, such thinking is misguided.

A U.S. worker can produce a few more clothes in a week than a Vietnamese worker, but the U.S. worker can produce a whole lot more backhoes in a week than his Vietnamese counterpart. Trade allows the U.S. to stop wasting its time producing goods like clothes that it is only a little bit better at producing.

It also allows the U.S. to concentrate on producing what it is a whole lot better at producing. For a given number of workers, the U.S. can obtain more clothes by trading backhoes to Vietnam than it ever could producing its own clothes.

In a similar fashion, trade also makes Vietnam better off. It does not have to waste a lot of resources producing backhoes, which it does much more inefficiently than the U.S.

Instead, Vietnam can produce clothes which it does only a little less efficiently than the United States. Vietnam will find it cheaper to trade for backhoes than to make them. The way to think about trade is as another method of production.

The U.S. has two methods of production. The U.S. can make clothes directly, or it can produce clothes indirectly, by instead producing backhoes and trading them to Vietnam for even more clothes.

Hopefully members of Congress do not agree with Donald Trump's zero sum characterization of trade. Recently, President Obama finished negotiating the Trans Pacific Partnership Free Trade Agreement with 11 nations including Japan, Australia, Vietnam, Singapore, and Malaysia. Congress will have to agree to the treaty in order for it to take effect.

The free trade agreement comes at a good time for our nation. The U.S. economy has grown very slowly since the financial crisis of 2008. A free trade agreement can help our economy grow at a faster rate and increase incomes for our workers at a time when other policies have not seemed to work.

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