

DONALD TRUMP'S TARIFF POLICY, THE EROSION OF US ALLIANCES, AND THE RISE OF CHINA IN GLOBAL POLITICS

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Abstract

Among the largest deviations from the liberal international economy that the United States has traditionally encouraged is a shift to protectionist trade policies under President Donald Trump. It critically examines the implications of Trump's 'America First' policy, particularly the tariffs associated with the new global political and economic landscape, the disappearance of old-style American alliances and the rise of China in the new world order. The US-China trade war was perceived as a means to balance the trade and to tackle what was said to be unfair economic practices. The geopolitical fallout, however, was big. Tariff trade on friends and foes led to uncertainty in transatlantic and Indo-Pacific cooperation, lowered faith in American leadership, and helped to divide multilateral cooperation.

The research is qualitative and employs thematic analysis in order to explore the geopolitical implications of Trump's tariffs policies. The research design in this study is Qualitative with research method is themed analytic. Themes of economic nationalism, changing global alliances, strategic decoupling and rebalancing of power are traced in policy documents, official statements, speeches, trade reports, diplomatic statements, and in contemporary academic publications. The findings suggest that the unilateral measures have weighed on longstanding U.S. alliances and provided opportunities for China to enhance its influence in other fields, including those of the Belt and Road initiative, in regional trade pacts or other institutional leadership positions. The liberal post-Cold War world order has become a more competitive, multipolar geopolitical realm in which the Chinese as an assertive international player have gained from economic nationalism and strategic unilateralism, the paper contends.

Keywords: America First doctrine, the US-China trade war, tariff policy, economic nationalism, global power transition, US alliances, rise of China, multipolarity.

Introduction.

Donald Trump's presidency was an important change in U.S. foreign economic policy since the dawn of the Cold War. Under the catchcry of America First, the Trump administration has embraced a very Protectionist and nationalist approach to globalization, free trade and multilateral cooperation, departing from the norm of bipartisan support. The tariff was a major element, the use of tariffs as a means of economic repression, political maneuvering and geopolitical rivalry. Trump believed that trades with friends and foes have always been unfair; on both sides, he felt, was taking more than it was owed to the United States by compromising the nation's economic power and independence.

The international political economy spillover of the US-China trade war started in 2018 with the US levying tariffs on Chinese imports. The reasons cited for the moves were China's alleged "currency manipulation" and "industrial espionage" and the theft of intellectual property. The tariff regime, however, was more than a bilateral economic grievance; it was of great geopolitical significance. The trade war was the symptom of a power struggle between an old dominant power that is looking to assert itself again, and a new global power that is looking to

assert itself. Tariffs were not only economic tools, but also a symbol of a new technological contestation, a contestation regarding the global value chain, a contestation regarding the institutional leadership and a contestation regarding the future shape of the international order. The debate over Trump's trade policies has been polarized in the academic world. The tariff approach is a sensible reaction to the rising geopolitical danger from the Chinese threat for realists. The realists call for economic containment in the context of great power war gaming. However, its unilateralism has undermined the norms and institutions that have sustained American leadership in the world, liberal institutionalists say. Additionally, the constructivist analysis suggests that the discourse of economic nationalism and the discourse of civilizational competition were a spark to the scepticism of the international system and the increased ideological polarization in the international politics. However, the notion that Mr Trump's policies were economic has given way to one that is more geopolitical and geopolitical in nature, focusing on a change in geopolitical power dynamics and alliances.

A major issue, which many don't mention, was the dismantling of the old alliances in the United States that would be effected by the tariff plan. The Trump administration also imposed tariffs on traditional allies including countries in the European Union, Canada and Japan—many of its tariffs are based on national security under Section 232 of the Trade Expansion Act. The moves left the relations within the Atlantic powers more complicated, strained relations between NATO partners and increased perceptions of American unilateralism. Meanwhile, the administration's doubts about multilateralism and free trade also created uncertainty among U.S. allies about the stability of U.S. leadership, including its criticism of the World Trade Organization and rejection of the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP). It was not only the economic effects, but the overall decline in the alliance system which had served as the backbone of the US hegemony since 1945.

This geopolitical fragmentation was a huge opportunity for China to change the orientation of global governance institutions. China became a proponent of globalization, economic interdependence and multilateralism while the US became more confrontational, insular and isolationist. However, China seized on a loss of U.S. confidence to build the Belt and Road, a deeper partnership with regional economic organizations, and a greater China presence in developing economies. Again the US was criticised for its debt diplomacy, authoritarianism and strategic drive and as the US withdrew its ability to take up the slack in the diplomatic and economic arena was increasingly apparent. So the trade war just sped up some of the geopolitical change it was meant to slow.

This research suggests that the tariff legislation of Trump is to be interpreted not just as an economic policy but also as one of the reasons leading to the changes in the political map of the world. The United States attempted to weaken longstanding pillars of the liberal international order on which it had held sway, as well as some members of its alliance network with the economic nationalism and unilateral coercive trade actions that it waged. These developments also opened up more strategic opportunities for China to increase its influence in the economic, diplomatic and institutional arena. This article uses a qualitative research design of thematic analysis to analyze the reconfiguration of the international relations shaped by protectionism, alliance erosion and great power competition. This is to make a contribution to the current discussion on the declining hegemony, multipolarity and the reconfiguration of power in the 21st century.

The debate over American trade policy under Trump is the most significant recent debate on international relations. Trump's agenda on economics went beyond a trade change. It was a shift from the liberal internationalism which has governed the United States as the world's leader since the end of World War II. There are a ton of resources available to examine the economic effects of the US-China trade war in the literature. But an emerging research agenda

challenges the notion that Trump's protectionism was less of an issue for geopolitics of alliance politics, legitimacy of global institutions, and the quick acceleration of power shift to China. It's going to be an economic nationalist policy that will be studied by economists. But state interests, and economic sovereignty and protection of home industry, are more important than liberalised global interdependence. Trump's approach to trade was a revival of a form of nationalist economic thinking that opposed the neoliberal globalisation and mutually beneficial interdependent exchange (Helleiner, 2021). Finally, Rodrik (2018) maintains that protectionism is also the response to domestic unease about various aspects of globalization, particularly on the groups of industries that have been adversely affected by deindustrialization and the reconfiguration of global value chains. But a number of analyses have overlooked the larger geopolitical implications of Trump's trade approach: impositions can fracture the cohesion of the alliance, and can damage the U.S.'s strategic credibility in international negotiations.

The Trump-China trade war has been most commonly understood by most realist scholars as great power competition or strategic rivalry. The rise of China is “a structural challenge to America's hegemony,” and there is “a high probability” of a confrontation between the two countries, writes John Mearsheimer (2014). Tariffs were supposedly weapons of the economy, but they were now geopolitical and technological weapons to counter the emergence of China. Rising-power/hegemon dynamics have the potential for systemic instability and conflict (see: Graham Allison (2017), Thucydides Trap). Realism offers us some of the structural explanations for the US-China trade war, but tends to see confrontational economic policies as a more benign normalcy. Realism is less concerned with the fact that unilateral economic nationalism has undermined the coalitions which have traditionally supported U.S. global influence.

Instead, liberal institutionalist authors claim that Trump's trade measures are undermining the architecture of "liberal international order. American power was not only economic or military but also contained the development of rules-based institutions, alliances and cooperative arrangements which provided legitimacy and predictability in the global politics after 1945 (G. John Ikenberry 2018) To Ikenberry, Trump's attacks on multilateral arrangements, insults to NATO allies, withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership and rejection of World Trade Organization dispute procedures represented a kind of strategic self-sabotage. Similarly, Robert Keohane and Nye (2011) highlight the need for institutional cooperation and complex interdependence in boosting American power and influence in the past, by engaging allies in shared institutions of governance and economic interdependence.

The concept of “soft power” is especially relevant to Trump's overall trade policy. If this is the case, then other drivers of sustainable global leadership must be more important than coercive powers, for example legitimacy, attraction and normative influences as suggested by Joseph Nye (2004). In this respect, Trump's rhetoric and tariff policies defied the concept of America as an international leader, as one that can be counted upon. US foreign policy was seen by European and Asian allies as transactional, unpredictable and strategically unilateral. Some experts said the waning influence of American soft power has opened up the door for China to position itself as the standard-bearer of globalization and multilateralism even as it grapples with a host of problems around its authoritarian political systems and strategic expansionism. There is also a considerable body of literature that indicates tariff policies have been a source of tensions in the U.S. traditional alliance. Stephen Walt (1987) explains that the basis of alliances is not shared interests but rather “perceived reliability” and “strategic trust.” Trump's protectionist tariffs imposed on allies like the EU, Canada and Japan have created unprecedented tensions in the Western alliance system, using national security as the justification. They have been found in earlier research, but most have considered association-

based changes in geopolitics as secondary effects instead of primary effects of protectionism. The potential for indirect overthrow of hegemony through the erosion of legitimacy of alliances and strategic coordination is one dimension that has not been adequately explored in the literature.

Power Transition Theory is also considerable in its insights into the geopolitical implications of Trump's tariff plans. Systemic instability can be exacerbated as a rising power approaches the level of an established hegemon, as scholars from Organski to Kugler have noted. China's economic expansion and modernization of technology and institutions threatened U.S. hegemony in various areas of world influence. Trump's tariffs were therefore aimed at curbing the growth of China's economic power by harming its exports and the interdependence of the economies. However, there is recent research that shows that such policies have mixed results. The trade war did not dampen the isolation but it was a catalyst for Beijing to diversify trading partners, enhance regional economic cooperation and extend its strategic initiatives such as Belt and Road Initiative, Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership etc. It is thus possible for China to gain from the American unification and to become an alternative centre to the world economy.

But recent research also provides some insights into some of the paradoxes of Trump's protectionism. The arguments on tariffs were presented on both sides. Supporters claimed that they were required to deal with unfair trade practices by China and to provide industrial sovereignty to the industry. Tariffs would have a severe impact on American consumers, critics said, and would throw a wrench into global supply chains and would alienate the allies that are essential to counter China's rise. Much of the literature is also divided into two groups, one of economic analyses of the effects of trade policy and the other of geopolitical analyses of strategic rivalry. To date, however, there has been no comprehensive research that has brought economic nationalism, alliance disintegration and China's geopolitical rise together into a single analytical framework to explain the broad transformative changes in the international order.

This study aims to fill these gaps by critically analyzing how Trump's tariff policies not only intensified US-China strategic rivalry, but also undermined alliance cohesion and contributed to structural changes to global power relations. This research uses an integrated geopolitical theory which is the combination of Realism, Hegemonic Stability Theory, Power Transition Theory and Economic Nationalism, as opposed to the existing scholarship, which tends to distinguish the economic or security strands. In this way, the paper contributes to the debate over hegemonic decline, multipolarity and the change of the liberal international order in the 21st century.

This study is based on the interpretivist research philosophy that claims international relations and geopolitical behaviour is socially constructed and politically contingent. The Interpretivism is particularly appropriate for the research of global politics' transformations, because it enables the researcher to interpret the process of sense-making of states, to uncover the threats to them, and to redefine the alliances in the present international context. Geopolitical decision-making, particularly trade wars, the shifting of alliances and strategic competitions are not as positivist approaches based on measurable variables and determinism, but are rather dynamic processes influenced by political perceptions, ideological assumptions and discursive processes, which over time takes shape.

The present study is especially important to the interpretivist frame as the tariff policies of Trump cannot be interpreted by economic variables alone. Instead, these policies were within a broader narrative of economic nationalism, sovereignty, hegemonic anxiety and strategic rivalry. Thus, the study will focus on the meaning, political agenda and geopolitical implications in the policy making and diplomatic engagement.

Research Design

A qualitative exploratory study that investigates the relationship between Trump's tariff policies, decline of alliances and the increasing presence of China in the world. An exploratory design is appropriate in an international setting since the subject is complex, dynamic, and cannot be completed with only measurements of the variables. It goes beyond describing events and explores in detail the implications of economic protectionism on strategic alignments, institutions and perceptions of global leadership.

The qualitative research underscores the intricate political, economic and strategic nature of the U.S.-China trade war. It can be used to provide a context for geopolitical shifts in the context of the existing global discourse on the changing nature of the international order and the transfer of hegemony.

Method of Research

The study is an inductive, qualitative, and theoretical approach, and the interpretations of the texts are based on the systematic interaction with the geopolitics text, policy documents and interpretation of scholarly texts. This is not a quantitative research design to test an ex-ante hypothesis based on a measure. Rather it is a quest to uncover patterns, stories, and themes of economic nationalism, alliance shift and global power redistribution.

The method of induction has proven its usefulness in international relations research in situations where the outcome of geopolitics is the process of interaction between the actors of state, institutions and strategic perceptions. The study presents an iterative interpretation of data that provides an integrated understanding of the role of tariff policy in wider political change in the world.

The research is a qualitative secondary data analysis technique, based on primary data collection technique. This article relies on secondary qualitative analysis of a variety of geopolitical products by governments, international organisations, policy institutions and academic scholars. This is appropriate because this study doesn't create new data from the survey and interviews, but focuses on the behavior of the policy, communication of the policy and the transformation of the policy.

The data collected from a systematic search of relevant documents directly related to Trump's tariff policies, the trade war between the United States and China, the politics of alliances and China's geopolitical expansion. The most analytical and reliable content was provided through authentic and academically sound sources.

Sources of secondary data

The secondary sources consulted for this research include: Articles from peer-reviewed journals from the fields of global politics, political economy and international relations reports from the White House, the White House's president's policy statements, or president's speeches during the Trump administration; Reports from NATO, the World Trade Organization, the International Monetary Fund and Congressional Research Service.

- Papers on trade policy and proclamations of tariffs; and
- Country studies and assistance from the United Nations Development Program and the World Bank; and books on the civil war, military, and politics; Academic fiction and non-fiction on Realism, alliance politics, hegemonic transition and economic nationalism and Geopolitical publications and analyses by diplomats on China's globally strategy

Analytical triangulation is strengthened by the fact of using multiple secondary sources and the multidimensional approach to researching a problem.

Design of sampling

Purposive sampling techniques were used in the study. Documents and academic materials selected were dependent on the objectives of the research. The sampling technique that is used

in this research is purposive sampling because this is not a statistical representative sampling and random sampling.

Selection criteria were: • recent events and developments; It contains discussion on the topic of alliance politics/liberal international order, • understanding of Chinese foreign policy; and In the context of its theory application to Realism, Power Transition Theory, and/or Economic Nationalism and International relations scholarship, the reliability of the publications and in publications

Using this method enabled the materials studied to make significant contributions to the conceptual and analytical aspects of the study.

Data Analysis Technique

The research employs thematic analysis method, interpretive geopolitical analysis. The thematic analysis is the technique used to find patterns, stories and geopolitical themes from various text sources. Interpretative geopolitical analysis can also be used to understand how states define strategic significance, threat and justification of their policies in relation to other global actors in the context of global power relations.

To carry out this analytical process, several readings of documents were conducted, coding salient ideas, classification of recurring themes and interpretation of the geopolitical implications. This methodological shift enabled the study to shift from a descriptive to a critical study of a change in the global system of structures.

Thematic analysis is a new technique developed by Bjork and Holst (2002).

A systematic multi-step process of thematic analysis was undertaken:

Spend some time getting to know the data. Take some time to get familiar with the data.

The multiple reading of the policy documents, scholarly articles, speeches and geopolitical reports identified common trends and strategic narratives.

2. Preliminary Coding

The concepts of 'economic nationalism', 'strategic decoupling', 'alliance distrust', 'hegemonic decline', and 'Chinese geopolitical expansion' were coded from several sources.

3. Developing the Theme

Codes were then grouped under the larger analytic themes of trade conflict, alliance erosion, institutional weakening and global power transition.

4. Analysis of interpretation

Themes were analyzed by using the theory of realism, theory of hegemony stability and power transition theory. 5. The themes were then combined into a broader story that can serve as an analysis of the geopolitical invention, the role played by Trump's tariff policy in shaping the global political landscape.

The themes were analysed using the theories of realism, hegemony stability theory and power transition theory.

5. Geopolitical Fabrication

Finally, the overarching analysis was integrated with the themes to understand how Trump's tariff policies helped shape the global political landscape.

Table 1

Thematic Analysis Framework

| Major Themes | Subthemes | Interpretation | Geopolitical Implications |
|-----------------------------|---|--|--|
| Economic Nationalism | Protectionism, trade sovereignty, industrial revival | Tariffs reflected nationalist resistance to globalization | Weakening of liberal economic order |

| | | | |
|---|---|--|---|
| US-China Strategic Rivalry | Technological competition, trade conflict, strategic containment | Trade war evolved into broader geopolitical confrontation | Intensification of great power competition |
| Erosion of US Alliances | NATO tensions, tariff disputes with allies, unilateralism | Allies perceived declining US reliability | Reduced Western strategic cohesion |
| Decline of Liberal International Order | Institutional distrust, multilateral weakening | US undermined rules-based leadership | Growth of multipolar international system |
| China's Expanding Influence | Belt and Road Initiative, regional integration, diplomatic expansion | China utilized US retrenchment strategically | Expansion of Chinese geopolitical leadership |

The instrument was tested for reliability and construct validity
To ensure the reliability and validity of the study, methodological triangulation was used in the study by using various secondary sources from the academic, government and institutions. The use of multiple sources was useful in minimizing the interpretive bias and ensuring an analytical consistency.

It is also a conceptually sound research in terms of the data interpretation that is oriented towards some internationally accepted theories and geopolitical frameworks in international relations. The reflexive analysis was used in the process of the research in order to clarify the interpretation of the research and also to prevent the subjectivity of the distortion of the meaning of the research. Systematic coding methods and re-reading of the texts also contributed to reliability of themes .

Ethical Issues

The study was done in an ethical way following the academic research standards of Qualitative secondary research. This research paper is not conducted with human subjects and no endeavour was undertaken to gather any personal data for this research, as this research is based on publicly available documents, institutional reports, scholarly publications and official statements.

Academic ideas, theories and interpretations of events are properly referenced according to the APA 7th edition referencing style. The study is also analytical and critical of conflicting scholarship, and does not have an a priori conclusion that is ideologically driven. Additionally, the ethical integrity was achieved by accurately representing the geopolitical events, by interpreting the sources in a balanced way, and by avoiding the selective and misleading interpretation of the sources.

Finally, the methodologically sound approach which has been adopted in the qualitative approach used to study the nexus of Trump's tariff policies, the instability of alliances, hegemonic transition and changing world politics.

Conclusion

For an example of unilateral and protectionist economic statecraft, which can have systemic consequences beyond just trade and fiscal, consider Trump's tariff measures. The “America first” policy reversed the course of U.S. postwar liberal economic policy from an internationalist stance to one that was more coercive and economically nationalistic. This tariff escalation was not only an economic adjustment, but a geopolitical process as well that redefined the concept of an ally, deepened the strategic competition and reshaped the global order.

The result of this research is one of the most important. The architectural changes in the traditional alliances, particularly NATO and Indo-Pacific countries, were affected by the tariff policy. By escalating tariffs and trade tariff, the United States has diminished its role in the liberal international order even with strategic allies. The Realist view is that power is used irrespective of the quality of alliances, and the Liberal Institutionalist view is that the reduction of cooperative institutions that are used to restrain American power. This opened up opportunities for other centres of influence, most notably China.

One such example of the transformation of interdependence to strategic competition between the U.S. and China is the U.S.-China trade dispute. To calm China's ascendance, tariffs were applied while the structural decoupling of China was started, moving China towards diversifying trade routes and increasing institutional control. As China's capabilities grow, the system appears to be moving towards more competition and is slowly fattening itself on the United States. Meanwhile, the weakening of Hegemonic Stability mechanisms suggests a reduction in the ability of the unilateral leadership to maintain international order.

The study concludes that the Trump-era tariff policies helped to further accelerate the systemic shift toward increased multipolarity, decreased institutional cohesion and increased great power competition. It is not a 'return' to economic nationalism, but rather economic nationalism and strategic competition that has re-arranged the balance of power in the international scene. Policy makers in the United States should shift from a unilateral and coercive tariff-based foreign and trade policy to a geoeconomic, institutionalized and cooperative approach. A nation's voice in the world depends on its ability to combine a sound domestic economy with multilateral engagement, not punitive trade policies and isolation which can damage its strategic credibility.

The Alliance's management.

Re-establishing trust with transatlantic and IndoPacific partners is one of the key aspects of maintaining the stability of the system. The U.S. must commit to more clearly defined, tangible milestones with partners such as NATO and other regional allies, such as Japan and European Union, and collaborate with them more effectively. "The ties of alliance are not to be used as a piece of economic leverage.

Competition doesn't have to be economic decoupling between the United States and China. It may indicate a measured path forward with the U.S. and China. Mechanisms are needed for crisis communication, dispute resolution on trade and governance technological risks in order to prevent a spillover into a larger conflict in the system.

4. International Bodies' Governments

The WTO and the IMF need to be reformed as they are out of sync with the multipolar reality. There is a need for further legitimization of institutions, strengthening of dispute settlement bodies, expansion of the capacity of enforcement and better enablement of the growing powers in decision making.

5. World Economy Stability

States need to take a multi-faceted and mutually agreeable approach towards achieving economic security in global supply chains and avoiding protectionism. Meanwhile, coordinated schemes can help to manage systemic vulnerability in critical sectors and interdependency can be preserved, especially in the semiconductor, energy and digital infrastructure sectors.

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