

America First: Power and Geopolitics in US Trade Policy under President Trump

Holger Janusch and Witold Mucha*

Abstract: President Trump's vision for a new US trade policy is based on the notion that trade is a zero-sum game and that trade deficits cause losses of jobs and production. Therefore, the main objective of this America First trade policy is the reduction of trade deficits. To reach this goal, the Trump administration announced an aggressive bargaining approach to use all US trade laws, strictly enforce all existing trade agreements, and favor bilateral over multilateral trade negotiations. Regardless of the potential negative economic impact, the proposed trade approach has three negative implications. First, it risks trade wars with major US trading partners. Second, it is based exclusively on hard power and neglects possible damages for US soft power. Third, it neglects geopolitical and security considerations of US trade policy.

Keywords: US trade policy, geopolitics, power politics, soft power, economic nationalism

Stichwörter: US-Handelspolitik, Geopolitik, Machtpolitik, weiche Macht, Wirtschaftsnationalismus

1. Introduction

After the Second World War, the United States became the advocate for free markets and trade liberalization in world politics. As the new hegemon, the United States established a liberal world order based on the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) institutions, the later World Trade Organization (WTO), and the Bretton Woods institutions. While there was an occasional tendency in the United States toward protectionist measures, especially during economic crises, trade liberalization has determined US trade policy for decades. The basic principle of the liberal world order created by the United States was the common understanding that free trade creates wealth for all nations. In contrast, President Trump questions this basic principle by arguing that the United States lost jobs, production and wealth because of the past trade agreements. He also knows whom to blame for the, in his view, disastrous trade policy: former US trade negotiators who have been ripped off by foreign countries. In order to bring back economic growth and jobs for American workers, President Trump renounces the liberal trade policy of the past. Instead, the Trump administration calls for an America First policy and *economic nationalism* with clear objectives in trade policy: changing the US trade deficit into a surplus by renegotiating existing trade agreements such as the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), withdrawing from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), enforcing existing trade agreements and trade laws, and imposing tariffs on China and other countries that supposedly use unfair trade practices or currency manipulations (Navarro and Ross 2016, 15; United States Trade Representative 2017, 6). The new US administration's rationale seems to be based on national economic interests first, while neglecting the security and geopolitical implications of that formula.

2. Competitive liberalization and the pivot to Asia: Trade policy under Presidents Bush and Obama

While the United States favored multilateral trade agreements for decades, bilateral free trade agreements (FTAs) became the

primary focus of US trade policy after the signing of NAFTA in 1994. Yet, trade policy under the Clinton administration was characterized by a deadlock due to disagreement, especially about labor standards in trade agreements, with the Republican-led Congress. The Bush Administration was finally able to break this deadlock by convincing Republicans to accept labor provisions in FTAs and, therefore, gaining enough support from Democrats in Congress for a trade mandate, the so-called trade promotion authority (Janusch 2015, 1055–1059). The strategy of the Bush administration was to incite “competitive liberalization” by negotiating bilateral and regional FTAs with trading partners that were ready to open and reform their markets, whereas states that were unwilling to liberalize trade were left behind. Thus, the Bush administration hoped to put pressure on trading partners that were unwilling to open markets and to gain leverage in future trade negotiations, including the Doha round (Evenett and Meier 2008, 36). Instead of potential economic gains, the Bush administration chose FTA partners primarily based on security considerations. In the Middle East and North Africa in particular, the Bush administration pursued the idea of negotiating bilateral FTAs that were to serve as building blocks for a Middle East Free Trade Area (MEFTA) (Janusch 2016). After the FTA negotiations with the United Arab Emirates had failed, the idea to build a regional free trade area disappeared from the trade agenda. Due to critique by corporate interests such as the US Chamber of Commerce, the Bush administration shifted the focus on FTA negotiations to larger economies in the second presidential term. Yet, security affairs still played a major role in selecting FTA partners, as the beginnings of FTA negotiations with the two major allies Colombia and South Korea prove. Furthermore, the Bush administration began informal talks over the TPP.

Even though trade policy had a low priority on President Obama's agenda at the beginning of his first term, the administration continued the liberal trade policy. After renegotiations, the Obama administration pushed forward the ratification of the pending FTAs, including the ones with Colombia and South Korea (Janusch 2016, 185–200). Furthermore, the Obama administration began official TPP negotiations. TPP complemented the “pivot” or “rebalance” of US foreign policy from the Middle East toward East

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Asia (Falke 2015, 366). In addition to the geopolitical importance, the Obama administration emphasized that TPP serves as a tool to set international standards, including labor rights and environmental protection, which otherwise would be set by China. While US foreign policy focused more and more on East Asia, the Obama administration also started the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) negotiations with the EU. In addition to economic interests, TTIP together with TPP would have strengthened the geopolitical position of the United States by fostering trade and investment in the Pacific and Atlantic regions with the United States as the center. The Obama administration also took a tougher stance vis-a-vis China by initiating antidumping and countervailing cases against Chinese exporters, filing more and more complaints against China in the WTO, and denying Chinese acquisition of US companies. Furthermore, the Obama administration refused to grant China status as a market economy, which was to be done no later than 15 years after China's WTO accession in 2001 (Ikenson 2017b, 2).

3. Economic nationalism: Paradigm shift in US trade policy under President Trump

While President Trump claims to be a "free trader", he emphasizes that free trade has to be fair in the sense that foreign countries do not use unfair trade practices such as export subsidies or currency manipulations. However, the argument that free trade has to be fair is not new in US politics. Since the negotiations about NAFTA, administrations have argued that the United States has to push forward trade agreements that enforce international labor and environmental standards in order to protect American jobs against unfair competition. So what is it exactly that differentiates Trump from his predecessors?

Rather than assuming trade to be a positive sum game as liberal trade theories do, the Trump administration takes a mercantilist approach and regards trade as a zero sum game. The welfare loss by one country is the gain by another. Based on the balance of trade, the Trump administration dichotomizes between winners and losers. Countries with a trade surplus are winners, whereas trade deficits cause the loss of production and jobs. In this sense, the United States, having huge trade deficits with China, Mexico, South Korea and Germany, is being ripped off by these countries. By blaming former trade negotiators for the US trade deficits, the Trump administration's view on trade agreements seems to be based on the notion that the balance of trade can be negotiated. It just needs tough and smart negotiators to get the best deals and, thereby, trade surpluses. The main objective of US economic nationalism is to shrink the trade deficit and, thereby, stimulate economic growth, strengthen the manufacturing sector and eventually create jobs (Navarro and Ross 2016, 5; United States Trade Representative 2017, 5-6).

The basis of the notion of economic nationalism is problematic for several reasons. First, while unfair trade practices of trading partners might affect imports in specific sectors, they have only minor effects on the overall US trade deficit. The trade deficit is mainly caused by the shortfall in domestic savings and investments. Currency manipulation can have important effects on balances of trade. Yet, they are only a minor factor

in explaining the current US trade deficit (Pearson 2017a, 2017b). Second, the trade policy of the Trump administration focuses on the producer surplus and neglects the consumer surplus. Cheaper imports and greater product variety due to free trade increase living standards. Furthermore, a large share of US imports are part of the value chain and serve as intermediate goods that are added to US exports. Thus, imports make US companies more competitive on the global market (Meltzer, Foda, and Dervis 2013). Third, while some studies (e.g. Acemoglu et al. 2014) show that US imports from China led to net job losses of 2 to 2,4 million, especially in manufacturing, other studies (e.g. Collard-Wexler and Loecker 2015) emphasize for example that a major factor for job losses in the steel sector is not foreign trade but increasing productivity.

4. America First trade policy and power politics

The notion of economic nationalism is not only characterized by goals to reduce the trade deficit, create jobs and strengthen the manufacturing base, but also the willingness to use all means possible to achieve these goals (United States Trade Representative 2017, 5). First, the Trump administration wants to strictly enforce US trade laws and existing trade agreements. In its new trade agenda, the Office of the United States Trade Representative emphasizes that the United States is willing to use antidumping and countervailing duties on imports that are dumped or subsidized. Furthermore, it is willing to use safeguard measures if increasing imports threaten domestic industries and to take appropriate actions when foreign countries violate existing trade agreements. It will also enforce the labor provisions in existing FTAs. Second, the Trump administration made clear that it will defend national sovereignty over trade policy. By highlighting that a WTO ruling does not automatically change US trade laws and practices, the Trump administration questions the WTO dispute settlement mechanism. Third, the Trump administration thinks that its goals can be best accomplished in bilateral rather than multilateral negotiations and is willing to renegotiate existing agreements (United States Trade Representative 2017, 6). Fourth, if trade agreements do not meet the standards, the Trump administration has stressed that it will withdraw from existing trade agreements and impose tariffs on trading partners that use unfair trade practices or currency manipulations.

These bargaining tactics comply with one of Trump's fundamental principles to maximize leverage. According to *The Art of the Deal* (Trump and Schwartz 1987), you are only going to make the deal you want from a position of strength. "*The worst thing you can possibly do in a deal is seem desperate to make it. [...] My leverage came from confirming an impression they were already predisposed to believe*" (Trump and Schwartz 1987, 37). By demonstrating resolve to enforce US trade laws and trade agreements, questioning the rules of the WTO, and threatening to impose tariffs, the Trump administration wants to increase its leverage. Because the Trump administration is convinced that the United States is losing from trade relations with specific countries such as Mexico or China, the administration is also convinced to have more leverage vis-à-vis these trading partners. Following the

argument of asymmetric interdependence, a state that benefits less from cooperation is also less dependent than its counterpart. For this reason it can threaten more credibly to break up an existing cooperation and receive concessions (Hirschman 1980).

It is reasonable to assume that the United States has a greater leverage in trade negotiations with trading partners such as Mexico and China. First, the ratio of foreign trade to the gross domestic product (GDP) of the United States is quite low compared to its larger trading partners. Thus, the US economy is less dependent on foreign trade in general. For example, four percent of China's GDP comes from exports to the United States, whereas US exports to China account for less than one percent of US GDP (The Guardian 2017). Second, the United States is still the biggest single market in the world. Therefore, the Trump administration can rely on US market power in trade negotiations (Navarro and Ross 2016, 20-21). Third, it is more difficult to find substitutes for imports than exports, because every state is willing to sell but not to buy. From a power perspective, it is less important which state buys more from another, but rather which state is less dependent on the market of the trading partner (Hirschman 1980, 32-33). Thus, trade deficits increase the leverage of the United States vis-à-vis its trading partners.

While US leverage in trade negotiations might be larger vis-à-vis its trading partner, it is still constrained and risky. First, trade agreements are based on reciprocity. Trade agreements usually have mutual reductions of trade barriers for which reason unbalanced trade agreements are not indefinitely possible. Second, the Trump administration wants to gain leverage by questioning the principles and rules of the WTO and existing trade agreements, threatening to withdraw from these agreements or imposing tariffs if their demands are not met. This aggressive approach increases the risk of trade wars that would severely hurt all involved countries, including the United States. Third, trading partners might be less willing to make concessions as a reaction to the Trump administration's threats because this could hurt their reputation of resolve in future negotiations. Giving in on threats signals the counterpart that it can push for more concessions. Fourth, the Trump administration wants to gain leverage by favoring bilateral over multilateral negotiations. It hopes that power asymmetries become more effective in bilateral negotiations. However, this assumption is questionable. Because the average US tariff is already quite low, its leverage is limited. Yet, TPP countries made more concessions vis-à-vis the United States, for example, regarding intellectual property rights and investment, because the United States helped them to get better access to more closed markets in Japan, Vietnam and other countries that would not have been possible to get on a bilateral basis. In addition, TPP would have increased the leverage in future accession negotiations because it could have been offered on a take-it-or-leave-it basis (Schott 2017, 3).

Additionally, the aggressive approach reduces the soft power of the United States. The Trump administration seems to be focused on using the full potential of the US hard power only. Hard power is the ability to get others to do something they do not want to do by using sticks and carrots (Nye 2004). The Trump administration's understanding of trade negotiations seems to be based on the notion that goals can only be achieved

by using coercion. Even rewards as another form of hard power are often neglected as means to accomplish the goals of the trade agenda (Navarro and Ross 2016, 17-21; United States Trade Representative 2017, 2-6; Trump and Schwartz 1987, 37-38). In contrast, soft power is the ability to persuade others to aspire to the outcomes you want by attraction due to one's ideas, values or culture (Nye 2004). No signs indicate that the Trump administration is aware of soft power and how its aggressive trade approach might damage US soft power. Soft power works through the ability to convince others that your ideas, values and policies are beneficial for all. Thus, others change their preferences and policies voluntarily. The America first trade policy and aggressive approach harms US soft power and makes it unattractive for other countries to admire US values, adopt US ideas and emulate US foreign policies. In this regard, TPP would have preserved and strengthened US soft power. For instance, countries such as South Korea, Indonesia or Thailand demonstrated a willingness to implement domestic reforms just to enhance their chances of eventually becoming a TPP member (Ikenson 2017a).

5. Ambivalent geopolitical implications under President Trump

The negotiations for the mega-regional trade agreements TPP with eleven Asian and Pacific Rim countries and TTIP with the European Union (EU) were based on the Obama administration's rationale of "foreign policy being economic policy" (Hamilton 2014, 81). As the only party to both negotiations, the Obama administration sought to leverage issues in one to advance its interests in the other (Hamilton 2014, 81). From a geopolitical perspective, TPP and TTIP were to serve the US principal strategic goal of preserving its global primacy in the face of rising challengers, particularly China. While Beijing is far from being a genuine peer competitor to the US, its rapid rise challenges Washington's hegemony, as Beijing's military efforts in the South China Sea illustrate (Morton 2016, 909; Tellis 2014, 99). What makes the rivalry unique is the mutual dependency between the US and China. On the one hand, Beijing is a political antagonist committed to ending American unipolarity, while on the other hand remaining integrated in a tight trading partnership with Washington and its allies (Tellis 2014, 98). It is against this backdrop that conceptually simple strategies as proposed by the Trump administration will not yield lasting results. For instance, in light of the North Korean nuclear program President Trump recently opened the door for China for concessions on his trade agenda in exchange for greater support in pressuring Pyongyang (McBride 2017).

Certainly, Beijing has seemed to play along by turning away coal shipments back to North Korea in accordance with new sanctions imposed by the United Nations in November 2016. Also China made more forceful statements in an attempt to cool the ratcheting of tensions in the region (Diamond 2017). However, the impact of these measures on Pyongyang is limited compared to the huge geopolitical implications of bartering economic or foreign policy issues with China in exchange for support on North Korea's nuclear program.

First, Washington might get dragged into making other concessions to win China's full support on Pyongyang (e.g. Beijing's territorial claims to Taiwan). Second, Trump's offer risks nullifying crucial leverage in urging Chinese cooperation: that stopping North Korea's nuclear program is also in China's interest (e.g. regional instability would make North Korean refugees flood into China). Third, other countries might get incentivized to bargain for a better economic relationship and thus get the US to give up on longstanding positions. Fourth, US allies such as Japan or Taiwan might start to ponder whether their traditional protectors in Washington might trade that long-standing relationship in exchange for other interests. This would introduce a huge level of uncertainty on an international level (Diamond 2017). It seems that Washington hazards geopolitical losses, particularly in South Asia, for the sake of the new economic nationalism.

The status quo of TPP and TTIP corroborates the new US trade policy. President Trump has already fulfilled a campaign pledge by signing an executive order to withdraw from TPP (Holland and Rascoe 2017). Predecessors Bush and Obama had pushed TPP forward based on the question whether East Asian integration would be led by China or by the United States. Indeed, Beijing has supported a separate FTA for the region which would bring together sixteen countries – except for the United States. Withdrawing from TPP gives away substantial leverage vis-à-vis China and thus might have major geopolitical ramifications. The TTIP negotiations convey a similar picture. Yet, the transatlantic negotiations have been stalled because of various reasons such as the Brexit and domestic protests, for example in Germany (McBride 2017). In a similar vein, President Trump's stance on NAFTA has mirrored the economic nationalism approach. Mexico was criticized for taking advantage of less strict labor and environmental regulations and thus creating incentives for US companies to install factories across the southern border (Puyana 2017, 145). Ottawa was in the pillory for Canada's supply-management system for dairy products and softwood lumber (Hadfield and Potter 2017, 214). In sum, until recently the handling of NAFTA, TTIP, and TPP demonstrated the Trump administration's economic nationalism trade policy: national economy first, geopolitics second.

6. Conclusions

America First trade policy and economic nationalism are based on the credo that trade is a zero sum game and trade deficits cause job losses and destruction of production. Thus, the main goal is to reduce the trade deficit in order to induce economic growth and create jobs for American workers. To reach this goal, the America First trade policy is based on an aggressive bargaining approach. The Trump administration signaled its willingness to use all US trade laws and strictly enforce all existing trade agreements. It also favors bilateral over multilateral negotiations to increase its leverage vis-à-vis trading partners. This economic nationalism holds three implications. First, it risks trade wars with major US trading partners. Second, it is based exclusively on hard power and neglects possible

damages for US soft power. Third, it neglects geopolitical and security considerations of US trade policy.

The latter implication seems to be only partly true as particularly the way China has been approached by the Trump administration illustrates. On the one hand, critics might call the administration's moves ambivalent, inconsistent, or unpredictable. On the other hand, though, other observers describe that approach as a pragmatic way of dealing with politics. Regardless of the interpretation, making trade concessions to Beijing in exchange for Chinese pressure on Pyongyang is one striking example in this regard. The way NATO has been perceived or the unexpected airstrike on an airbase in Syria also speak volumes about that pragmatic modus operandi. At this moment, it is too early to give a comprehensive assessment of the US administration's grand strategy from a power, security, and geopolitical perspective. For instance, in late April 2017 President Trump was about to sign an executive order withdrawing from NAFTA. However, after consultation, the pragmatic and liberal factions within the administration were apparently able to convince President Trump to refrain from withdrawing from NAFTA (Parker et al. 2017). Regardless of the (alternating) upper hand of one faction over the other, the ambivalence of the US administration seems to be its most reliable character trait at the moment.

This unreliability has not caused severe geopolitical ramifications as many observers in Washington and elsewhere predicted: the US has not embarked on a new war; there has been no grand bargain forged with Russia; alliances with transatlantic partners and regional neighbors are still functional. After almost a year in office, it seems that the White House might have accepted the burdens of superpower leadership – regardless of whether this change was brought about by cabinet shake-ups in favor of former militaries such as John Kelly, H.R. McMaster, and James Mattis. President Trump's address to the nation on strengthening the military engagement in Afghanistan seems to feed into this superpower leadership approach. At the end of the day, it remains to be seen to what extent this decision reflects a fundamental learning process at the White House. The US administration's lack of a grand Russia policy, a grand Middle East policy, and a grand Asia policy cast doubts in that regard (Glasser 2017).



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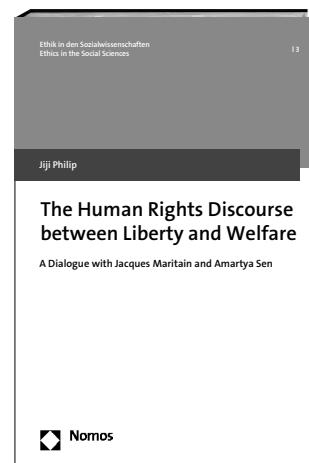
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