

The “America First” Trade Policy of the Trump Administration and its Economic and Military Repercussions

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A Senior Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for graduation  
in the Honors Program  
Liberty University  
Spring 2021

Acceptance of Senior Honors Thesis

This Senior Honors Thesis is accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for graduation from the Honors Program of Liberty University.

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**Abstract**

This paper looks at the “America first” trade policy of the Trump administration and the perception that it was used to accomplish his goals of economic and military independence from the rest of the world’s interdependent web. It looks at the history of trade policy and tariffs in the United States; this is then linked to the evolution of President Trump’s trade policy through the implementation of tariffs, renegotiation of trade deals, and revision of military policy in order to “decouple” from the rest of the world. It examines the US-China trade war and the desire for increased global trade standards. It looks at the influence of COVID-19 on President Trump’s policies. Finally, this paper looks deeper at the influence of President Trump’s military agenda on his economic and trade policy, and how this impacts globalization as well as implications looking forward.

*Keywords:* Trump administration, economic policy, tariffs, military policy, trade war, globalization, COVID-19

## **The “America First” Trade Policy of the Trump Administration and its Economic and Military Repercussions**

The Cold War marked the era of an arms race between several worldwide superpowers, attempting to prevent other countries from becoming too powerful, either militarily or economically. Since then, it is believed by many that such a war could never occur again between the major world powers due to intentional economic intertwining and interdependence, causing a worldwide web of economies. Under this theory, if one major country’s economy collapsed, the entire financial state of the world would suffer. However, during his time in office, President Trump challenged this idea through his economic policy to attempt a “decoupling” from the rest of the world’s economic entanglement. The Trump administration dramatically altered the economic policy of the United States under the fight for the American economy and fair global standards of trade. The evolution of President Trump’s trade policy was evident through his implementation of tariffs, renegotiation of trade deals, and revision of foreign policy. He embodied his economic goals through his widely contentious “America First” policy, which was both praised for improving the financial state of America and criticized as too protectionist. President Trump employed his “America First” economic policy as means to accomplish his stated goal of making America more independent from the rest of the world’s economic web; some also perceived this as means to achieve military independence and superiority.

### **The History of Trade and Tariffs in the United States**

Beginning in the late eighteenth century, trade theory has played a major role in the international economic strategy of the United States, resulting in the formation and implementation of tariffs into its trade policy. However, since the inception of the United States, people have argued over whether true free trade, without the existence of tariffs, or partially

restricted trade, with some existence of tariffs, is best for the economy and foreign relations of the United States. One of the first advocates for free trade was Adam Smith, who explained his ideas in *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (1776). He argued that competition is important to international trade and the economic growth of a nation. He stated that this can be accomplished by importing the specific goods that can be produced more efficiently in terms of labor productivity in a different country. Smith additionally argued that nations can achieve an absolute advantage and low trade costs only through the existence of free trade without tariffs (Poon, 2017). David Ricardo also advocated for free trade, particularly by arguing for the removal of strict trade laws that determined specific quotas and placed heavy tariffs on imports. On the other hand, several people, such as Friedrich List, countered these ideas by contending that tariffs were necessary in order to protect specific industries from unfair foreign competition and to help stimulate the domestic economy of nations (Poon, 2017).

Modern trade organizations and agreements in the United States find their roots in the original theories of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. The strong advocacy of both free trade and protectionist measures by several economists throughout the history of the United States impacted its trade policy by setting the stage for some of the largest multilateral trade agreements and organizations in history, playing an important role in the facilitation of trade among nations (Poon, 2017). Such theories led to the formation of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) and later the World Trade Organization (WTO) as a response to GATT (Poon, 2017). While these organizations may not be as relevant in recent years, they played an important role in beginning the facilitation of trade and globalization, which has impacted and led to the creation of current organizations and agreements. Globalization is the growing integration and interconnection of economies and societies throughout the world; one of

the most important distinctions of globalization include trade advancement between developed countries and developing countries (Jacoby, 2018). Increased trade through globalization is linked to increased GDP in participating countries and allows for the opportunity of comparative advantage and the specialization of economies (Jacoby, 2018). Risks of globalization include increased susceptibility to global financial shocks, social disparity through the loss of regional identity, income inequality, and loss of jobs in the manufacturing sector of developed countries (Hah, 2020).

### **Purpose of Tariffs**

Tariffs are a fundamental trade tool utilized in the US and global economies. Tariffs can be defined as a method of trade regulation imposed by a government that acts as a border tax on the goods entering into the importing country (Kerr, 2007). Countries implement them for the purpose of the creation of domestic economic stability, specifically in the price of imports, as the international price of the good fluctuates frequently. In addition, tariffs act as a form of taxation and thereby give countries another source of income (Poon, 2017). Tariffs can also decrease unemployment in a specific industry if they are properly applied to that industry by causing less dependence on imported goods while increasing domestic production (Suranovic, 2012). They are also used to protect infant industries and to apply political pressure to competing nations (Folsom, Gordon, Spanogle, 1986).

Since trade agreements and organizations do not always ensure that every country is economically competing fairly, tariffs play an essential role in allowing all countries to participate fairly on the same economic scale. This is accomplished by leveling the playing field between countries like China, who can produce and therefore sell goods for a substantially lower price due to a difference in labor and environmental standards, than the United States or the

European Union, which have much stricter regulations. The latter countries would impose a tariff on Chinese goods entering their country, making the price of the domestic products competitive to that of the imported product. This helps developing countries in particular who would otherwise be unable to participate and compete in large-scale international trade and provide a supplementary source of income (Poon, 2017). However, tariffs have shown negative correlation with other areas of the economy. While tariffs cause the imported price of goods to rise, they also tend to increase the domestic price of goods as well, thus impacting consumers. Tariffs are typically implemented to stabilize and benefit a particular industry but can also inversely impact a different industry by causing a higher price of goods, increased unemployment, or another unintended consequence (Suranovic, 2012). For example, the Trump administration implemented tariffs on steel imports in order to stabilize the steel industry, but it had negative consequences on the automobile and manufacturing industries and resulted in higher prices. Furthermore, if a large, economically significant country that has an international presence sets a tariff on an import, it can cause the foreign price of that particular product to fall due to a decrease in global demand from a change in trade flows (Suranovic, 2012).

### **Trump Administration: Economic Policy and Tariff Implementation**

Since his 2016 presidential campaign, President Trump argued for the need for trade modification in the United States specifically through tariffs and the renegotiation of several trade deals and organizations. President Trump strongly endorsed the US withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) and the renegotiation of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). The threat of rising unemployment prompted President Trump to champion a “Buy American and Hire American” policy that encouraged Americans to first support the US economy by purchasing domestically produced goods and services over foreign

products, particularly from rising economic powers like China (Słomińska, 2017). President Trump enacted his “American First” policy by creating a plan to stimulate the economy through job creation, specifically aiming to decrease the trade deficit through the taxation of imports and the encouragement of domestically producing and exporting goods. The Trump administration defined the deficit as a “net reduction in aggregate demand that depresses output below capacity and constrains labor below its full employment level” (Noland, 2018, p. 262). Thus, President Trump believed the deficit was partially responsible for the unemployment level; he believed an improvement in the deficit would lead to an improvement in the unemployment rate. The trade deficit also flooded the international market with the US dollar, leading to its devaluation and the increase in prices of imports into the US (Jacoby, 2018). Ultimately, the Trump administration aimed to increase investment into the US economy to encourage economic growth and reduce unemployment.

President Trump’s economic policy manifested early in his term through tariffs on steel and aluminum imports as a national security and defense measure (Noland, 2018). Since the beginning of his presidency, President Trump sought to improve the success of US trade in the global market by targeting unfair trade practices of other nations, such as artificial currency depreciation and low labor and environmental standards. Currency manipulation occurs when a country makes its goods and services less expensive on the international market by devaluing its own exchange rate (Jacoby, 2018). In order to create more jobs, President Trump increased the tax on American companies that were outsourcing labor to cheaper countries in order to return manufacturing to the States. As a result, consumers faced higher prices due to both the increased tariffs and the decreased outsourcing (Słomińska, 2017).

Prior to COVID-19, however, the economic stimulation through President Trump’s trade policy was linked to the creation of about 25 million jobs in the United States. According to the White House Council of Economic Advisors, September 2019 marked the 19<sup>th</sup> consecutive month with unemployment at or below 4 percent, which is the lowest it has been since May 1969 (2019). The US stock market also hit all-time highs and set new records in February 2020 prior to the onset of COVID-19. President Trump attributed this economic growth to his “America First” policy but later had to revise the policy in some respects to combat COVID-19 (*Council of Economic Advisors*, 2019). However, even though President Trump’s policy fostered economic success, as seen in the unemployment rate and market highs, the federal budget deficit continued to increase even before COVID-19 (Corden & Garnaut, 2018). Many argued that this was incongruent with his initial economic policy of reducing the federal budget deficit, especially since it increased with his COVID-19 stimulus checks. President Trump, however, continued to point back to the fiscal growth and anticipated recovery from COVID-19 demonstrated by early job recovery after the coronavirus shutdowns (Corden & Garnaut, 2018).

President Trump also applied his “America First” policy to prompt America’s “decoupling” from the rest of the world’s interdependent web, as stated in his initial economic policy. President Trump used his trade policy to decrease America’s dependence on other countries, specifically through tariffs and the cutting of corporate taxes. Both of these actions were intended to increase domestic production and investment; he also encouraged manufacturers to discontinue the use of foreign components in their “American-made” goods in order to be primarily comprised of American-made parts (Alden, 2018). He created several new economic policies among various countries under the goal of stimulating the US economy, which was perceived by some as highly protectionist and anti-globalist. Globalization includes the

integration of markets and goods from countries around the world through the deregulation of trade, decreased trade barriers like tariffs, and the encouragement and development of transnational corporations (Poon, 2017). Organizations like the World Trade Organization (WTO), NAFTA, and the TPP are typically created to encourage and reinforce globalization and free trade. However, since President Trump either removed the United States from these types of organizations or renegotiated such agreements, many people criticized him as too protectionist. On the other hand, others believed that President Trump’s renegotiation of existing trade agreements has allowed the United States to have greater economic success (Macdonald, 2018). President Trump’s skepticism of a completely interdependent global economy led him to strive for increased economic independence, which proved to be useful during the influx of COVID-19.

### **NAFTA Renegotiations and the USMCA**

Soon after the beginning of his term, President Trump led the removal of the United States from the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and responded with the creation of the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA). His negotiations of the new USMCA deal were rooted in his goal of improving America’s trade deficit by encouraging exports and discouraging imports. President Trump used the creation of the USMCA as a way to economically promote the United States, keeping in line with his “America First” policy. Trump argued that NAFTA encouraged companies to move their manufacturing to other countries, specifically Mexico, where labor was cheaper and environmental standards were more lenient. This prompted many companies to close their US manufacturing factories, causing a loss of thousands of American jobs (Stewart & Noorbaloochi, 2019). President Trump generated the USMCA in order to help America compete in the Mexican and Canadian manufacturing markets

and to return jobs to the States; the agreement went into effect on July 1, 2020. Though it is too soon to attribute any concrete post-COVID economic recovery to the agreement, the USMCA reduced trade barriers between participating parties and therefore strengthen their supply chains (McMaster & Tortolero, 2020). At the same time, President Trump also removed the United States from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP). Consequentially, the newly negotiated USMCA drew heavily from both agreements, specifically in reference to Anticorruption and Digital Trade. He also incorporated new intellectual property rights in hopes of sending a new spark of innovation throughout technology industry in the United States without the fear of knock-off products taking profits away from American innovators (Stewart & Noorbaloochi, 2019).

The Trump administration additionally used the USMCA as the first American trade agreement to address currency manipulation and artificial devaluation, another maneuver that gives counties an unfair advantage in the global trade arena (Stewart & Noorbaloochi, 2019). The USMCA also allowed for the Canadian and Mexican exemption from the hefty tariffs on steel and aluminum imports due to their close proximity to and security relations with the US (“Trump Administration Continues Push,” 2018). Furthermore, one of the most significant portions of the USMCA included a condition that American automobile manufacturers must domestically produce 75%, instead of the previous 62.5%, of the parts of a vehicle in order to qualify for a tariff exemption. This portion of the USMCA also required for vehicles to be at least 30% manufactured in a factory with a \$16 minimum wage, effectively protecting the unionized American and Canadian factory workers while forcing a raise in the minimum wage in Mexico (Stewart & Noorbaloochi, 2019). President Trump added these requirements in hopes of increasing the value of American vehicles and other products. Some, however, were critical of the new USMCA because it caused a substantial loss for the Mexican manufacturing economy

and a market loss of about 10% for Canadian dairy farmers, claiming it was too harsh on both of these countries (Stewart & Noorbaloochi, 2019).

### **Brexit: US Trade Reform**

Brexit is another example of how President Trump constructed trade deals to fit his economic policy of “America First.” The Brexit negotiation currently proposed between the UK and US is perceived as mutually beneficial between the two countries. While President Trump still promoted his “America First” policy, his support of the US-UK free trade agreement is an example of his openness to specific bilateral trade agreements and suggests he is not as protectionist as some critics claim (Gruszczynski, 2020). However, negotiations between Prime Minister Johnson and President Trump were centered around increased intellectual-property protections from the UK, specifically in the pharmaceutical industries, which was largely unsupported by House Democrats due to the risk of higher healthcare prices. As a whole, Brexit proved to be not as a significant disruptor of international trade and relations as initially anticipated, but time has yet to reveal its long-term impact. Trade negotiations between the UK and the EU are stalled as a result of COVID-19 (Gruszczynski, 2020). However, it is argued that without President Trump in office, the UK will suffer a loss of leverage in negotiations with the EU due to lack of US political pressure on the EU (Welfens, 2020).

### **Trump Administration: Military Policy**

Furthermore, some perceive that President Trump's economic policy was driven through underlying military objectives, which impacted his trade policy and view of globalization. President Trump's military measures fit hand-in-hand with his economic policy through the implementation of tariffs and other protectionist features on countries he perceived as a military threat, like China and Russia, thus employing his “America First” agenda on both an economic

and military scale. He increased the military budget and presence in several countries; many believed this created unquestionable military strength for the purpose of discouraging and suppressing rising conflict (Macdonald, 2018). The US defense budget increased by \$54 billion from \$642 billion to \$696 billion in 2018 as a result and included the expansion and modernization American nuclear weapons managed under the Trump administration (Sakwa, 2017). The increased military funding allowed for the formation of a new space program, which some view as another attempt from President Trump to display American military superiority and independence from the rest of the world.

President Trump also increased military pressure on China, Russia, and North Korea, all of which coincided with his economic policy with each of these countries. Since the beginning of his term, President Trump suspected a Russo-Chinese economic and military alignment. As a result, he attempted to alienate the two from each other. This was initially accomplished by preventing Russia’s military bullying and annexation of former Soviet territories, such as Ukraine, to avert excessive Russian dominance, influence, and strength in Eastern Europe. Later in his term, though, President Trump showed increased amiability to Russia, but ensured it would not be at the expense of American military and economic strength (Sakwa, 2017). On the other hand, President Trump discouraged a Russo-Chinese collusion by increasing economic pressure and military force on China, specifically through tariffs and the subsequent trade war. At the same time, many argue that President Trump aided in the disruption of Arab-Israeli relations during his move of the Israeli US embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem while simultaneously increasing military pressure in Afghanistan, Yemen, and Syria. Critics argue that President Trump had the underlying goal of challenging previous US relations with and prior attempt of globalization in the Middle East (Macdonald, 2018). To some, this had the positive

effect of President Trump’s policies being marked by his vision to restore and strengthen American through its military. To others, however, President Trump’s decisions have embodied his disdain for and led to the suppression of globalization (Macdonald, 2018).

### **Case Study: The US-China Trade War and Relations**

The synthesis of President Trump’s economic and military policies was exemplified in his foreign relations. More specifically, his “America First” policy shaped his decisions and agenda with China. President Trump’s foreign policy with China proved to be one of the most contented topics of his presidency.

#### **US Tariff Implementation**

In March of 2018, President Trump enacted heavy tariffs on steel and aluminum imports, primarily from China, into the United States as a measure of national security and defense. President Trump and his administration stated that these tariffs were necessary in order to become domestically independent, sufficient, and viable in the steel and aluminum industries. This independence, according to President Trump, was a military necessity to ensure that the national defense of the United States will not be compromised under any circumstances, such as if the United States were to dispute with countries providing most of these imports (“Trump Administration Continues Push,” 2018). This policy proved to be particularly successful during COVID-19, when international trade and economic dependence between countries suffered (Tokic, 2020). President Trump’s goal with these tariffs in particular was to increase domestic production to create more jobs and to rely less on China for national defense, aligning with both his economic and military policies.

### **Trade War and Economic Relationship**

Ultimately, the tariffs contributed to the United States’ trade war with China, led by President Trump’s “America First” trade policy and the desire to lessen the trade deficit with China. Both employed an unsustainable tit-for-tat tactic of trade, which many believe impacted the United States’ worldwide relations. At the height of the trade war, the United States’ projected dollar amount of tariffs exclusively on Chinese goods totaled about \$550 billion (USD) while China’s projected dollar amount of tariffs exclusively on American good totaled about \$185 billion (USD) (Zhang, 2018). The US-China conflict is displayed through the evolution of the economic relationship of the US and China from overdependency to decoupling. The description of the American Chinese relationship has changed in each administration, beginning with the Clinton administration and ending in the Trump administration. Under President Clinton, it was a “strategic partnership,” which changed to a “responsible stakeholder” in the Bush administration. The Obama administration described the relationship as a “partnership based on mutual respect and win-win cooperation” until the Trump administration refer to China and the United States as “strategic competitors” (Kwan, 2019, p. 59). President Trump identified America as excessively dependent on China in the last three decades in the areas of bilateral trade, foreign direct investment, technology, and academic growth. As a result, the Trump administration shifted the once economic partnership with China to a relationship based upon economic and technical competition and distrust fueled by President Trump’s decoupling mechanisms (Pencea, 2019).

### **Technological and Military Tensions**

The US-China trade war and President Trump’s trade policy with China was driven by the threat of China’s economic and technological advancement and dominance. President Trump

argued that not only would Chinese technological advancement lead to higher prices for American consumers, but it could also cause significant Chinese military advancement through technology, thus threatening the position and influence of the United States’ military (Pencea, 2019). This argument is supported by the “Made in China 2025” plan that the Chinese Premier Li Keqiang announced in 2015, detailing a ten-year plan to move China away from being the industrial center of the world to being the largest, most influential worldwide producer of high-quality products, particularly in the technology industry (Zhang, 2018). As a result, President Trump directly attacked this plan through the placement of tariffs on Chinese goods while also improving the US trade imbalance with China. In addition, President Trump fought for improved intellectual property protections of American technological innovations in order to preserve and promote American developers and the American technological economy (Pencea, 2019).

Tensions between the US and China also raised due to China’s aggressive move towards regional and economic hegemony in Asia. In order to secure a dominant position, China developed significant regional and global economic power through its Belt and Road Initiative. This kind of fiscal dominance enabled China to become a regional hegemon and use economic coercion to drive its agendas. Typically, regional hegemons bolster their military presence to assert its territorial claims and simultaneously overstep in the domestic politics of neighboring countries (Lind, 2018). This was seen in China’s strategy with neighboring countries like South Korea, Russia, and India and in its attempt to undermine the US military presence in Asia. China also secured regional hegemony through cultural programs that promoted its own agenda within the people and culture in China and the surrounding areas (Lind, 2018). Many argued that China achieved regional hegemony due to globalization; the interdependence of economies created financial leverage for China because it became a central market power in Asia and the rest of the

world, allowing it to apply coercive force to its region (Lind, 2018). The Trump administration perceived China’s hegemony has a direct threat and therefore focused its economic and military policy towards China to be that of containment (Modebadze, 2020). Critics, however, state that in President Trump’s quest to prevent China from achieving dominance, he led the United States to become a hegemon itself by using its own global dominance for the purpose of furthering itself and its own needs (Beržiūnas, 2019).

As much as the US-China conflict was a conflict over trade and economic success, it continued to be driven by the war over technological dominance and military superiority. President Trump argued that China’s desire for technological advancement could be traced to its subtle military and economic ties with Russia, another country that Trump attacked both economically and militarily (Sakwa, 2017). This suggested connection and threat of increased cooperation between China and Russia further encouraged President Trump to advance a harsher trade policy with both countries to discourage further technological advancement and thus discourage military advancement and collaboration between the two countries. However, many argued that the advancement of technology is needed in China in order to increase its national GDP by increasing the number of skilled workers in the economy and to increase consumption and decrease savings, particularly in a post COVID-19 economy. Many therefore believed that it was unlikely that President Trump’s measures would truly prevent Chinese technological advancement (Zhang, 2018).

One particular example of the Trump administration’s efforts to prevent Chinese military dominance included the escalation and rising tensions in the South China Sea. China began to expand their military presence on the islands of the South China Sea beginning in early 2017; this included the construction of new missile structures, communication towers, radar towers,

and storehouses for ammunition (Lind, 2018). China also created new international shipping lines to increase its economic and military influence in Southeast Asia. Once confronted, however, Chinese leaders claimed that this military expansion was valid because it was within their own territory and proved essential for relief in the case of natural disasters (Vuković, 2018). The United States adversely responded through increased tension and claimed that China impeded on the ability of the United States to enforce international freedom and interrupted the international military and economic peace (Vuković, 2018). Since the beginning of the Trump administration, the United States maintained an overall distrust of Chinese intentions. Historically, the United States sought to avoid conflict and interference between China and the Southeast Asian communities. However, the Trump administration judged the increased Chinese military advancement as a direct threat to the national security and interests of America as well as an attack on President Trump’s policy to contain Chinese military power (Vuković, 2018). Consequentially, President Trump dispensed greater US military presence and pressure in the South China Sea while simultaneously placing heavy economic repercussions in the form of tariffs on Chinese goods to execute President Trump’s military goal of Chinese de-escalation.

### **New US-Chinese Trade Agreement**

Despite rising economic and military tensions between China and the United States throughout President Trump’s term, both countries were able to enter into a trade agreement in January of 2020. The Phase One trade deal (2020) was created with the underlying understandings of:

RECOGNIZING the importance of their bilateral economic and trade relationship;

REALIZING that it is in the interests of both countries that trade grow and that there is adherence to international norms so as to promote market-based outcomes;

CONVINCED of the benefits of contributing to the harmonious development and expansion of world trade and providing a catalyst to broader international cooperation; ACKNOWLEDGING the existing trade and investment concerns that have been identified by the Parties; and RECOGNIZING the desirability of resolving existing and any future trade and investment concerns as constructively and expeditiously as possible (p. 1).

The Phase One agreement allowed both countries to cooperate in the areas of intellectual property, agriculture and food, financial services, macroeconomic policies, general trade, and dispute resolutions (“Economic and Trade Agreement,” 2020). The trade deal required President Trump to remove some of the tariffs on Chinese goods while requiring China to purchase more American products, particularly agricultural and manufactured goods, to account for about \$200 billion USD in the coming years. China was also required to implement harsher policies to prevent counterfeiting goods. However, the United States will keep about 25% of the tariffs on the \$250 billion USD of Chinese imports (Salmon, 2020). Since the creation of the Phase One deal, the onset of COVID-19 pushed both countries to meet again to discuss tensions arising from the pandemic, where Chinese and American officials mutually agreed that progress towards the goals outlined in the January trade deal must continue while maintaining cooperation with one another (“China, US Commit,” 2020). A phase two plan has not yet been outlined due to the complications arising from the coronavirus pandemic.

Even though the US-China trade war has significantly subsided, it already disrupted and threatened the international trading system. The overall global economy and foreign direct investment suffered even prior to COVID-19 as a result of the trade war because the US and China make up a composite two-fifths of the global GDP (Zhang, 2018). The World Trade

Organization heavily criticized President Trump’s tariffs on steel and aluminum by claiming they threatened the WTO’s trade rules and initiated the bilateral trade war and push for protectionism. Prior to COVID-19, the trade war negatively impacted the global distribution of resources, global investments, and global supply chains and will require restructuring due to tighter regulations (Kwan, 2019).

### **Influence of COVID-19**

The coronavirus sent the entire world into lockdown and therefore challenged the global integration of economies. It had significant impact on the global economy and forced world leaders to make decisions regarding containment and response of the virus. President Trump adopted his own coronavirus plan that ultimately influenced the 2020 election.

### **The US Response to COVID-19 and Policy Implementation**

President Trump’s response to the onset of the coronavirus brought waves of controversy throughout the United States, further contributing to its political polarization. According to the White House brief on the coronavirus, President Trump’s early response to the virus included early action to cut off travel from China beginning in January 2020 with enhanced airport screenings (White House, 2020). On March 27, 2020, President Trump signed the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act, a \$2.2 trillion stimulus bill to attempt to limit the economic impact of the virus and the shutdowns. He later signed a bill for a second round of stimulus checks to provide relief (US Department of the Treasury, 2020). The Trump administration also invoked the Defense Production Act (DPA), a Korean War era law, which allows the president to have special abilities to manage resources during crises, including the ability to gather confidential information, allocate supplies, expand domestic production, and fill government contracts through private enterprises (Raunig, 2020). President Trump enacted the

DPA in response to the global shortage of ventilators, personal masks, and other supplies. The Federal Reserve also cut interest rates to nearly zero percent. The Trump administration finally launched an aggressive plan to encourage and facilitate the development of a vaccine, including funding and the use of military distribution centers (Levin, 2020). Critics of the Trump administration’s response, however, claimed that the United States and President Trump did not act quickly enough and initially downplayed the severity of the virus. It was argued that President Trump was warned about the intensity and risk of the virus and instead brushed it off, thus having a trickle-down effect onto the individual states’ COVID response policies (Mayer, 2020). Many believe that the results of the 2020 presidential election reflect voter’s reaction to President Trump’s COVID-19 policy, or lack thereof, especially compared to other countries.

### **Short Run Impact**

The outbreak of the coronavirus as a worldwide pandemic interrupted international trade and relations. Many countries began to consider a decoupling policy in order to become more independent and self-sufficient, particularly in the areas of medical technology, pharmaceuticals, basic food items, and industries relating to national security needs. The coronavirus could therefore lead to a decline in globalization and a move away from the trend in outsourcing (Tokic, 2020). The coronavirus caused the negotiations and implementation of several trade deals to be stalled or interrupted, including the new USMCA deal and the US-China Phase Two deal. Trade negotiations between the UK and the European Union were also stalled as a result of COVID-19 (Gruszczynski, 2020).

In the short run, the decrease in consumption as well as local ordinances resulted in many businesses closing either temporarily or permanently, leading to an increase in the unemployment rate (Tokic, 2020). This was largely due to damage in consumer confidence and

increased savings rate. Interest levels in the short run will therefore stay low in attempt to encourage spending to help the economy. The travel and leisure industry was hit the hardest due to the closure of borders, impacting the airlines and other related sectors. Despite an initial crash due to COVID-19, the stock market made a remarkable recovery, with the S&P 500 closing at its highest level ever in mid-August 2020, again in December 2020, and again in February 2021, fueled by government stimulation and high investor confidence (Wursthorn, 2020). Many believe this was an artificial high, based upon faulty investor confidence, that created a bubble that could be popped in the long run due to natural self-correction of the market and the effects of the pandemic fully impacting the economy (Wursthorn, 2020).

### **Long Run Impact**

In the long run, many believe that the economic policy and stimulus checks in America as a response to the coronavirus will have financial consequences, including high long-run interest rates and high inflation rates (Tokic, 2020). In anticipation of a potential spike in inflation, the Federal Reserve has been holding interest rates extremely low to encourage spending and help to stimulate the economy. However, the US housing market and US stock market demonstrate that there is a substantial inflation of assets, which has historically given way to a recession (Hilsenrath, 2021).

Since the length and severity of the virus remain unpredictable, countries will increase domestic production of medicine and medical supplies in order to eliminate excess demand (Evenett, 2020). Additionally, the coronavirus is expected to increase the level of global poverty due to a significant rise in unemployment and lack of sustainable income. The economies that rely heavily on tourism suffered the most, whereas economies that focus on manufacturing and exporting performed well despite the virus. Economies and industries that are heavily reliant on

face-to-face services also suffered significantly. Interestingly, women have suffered from more job losses than men around the world as a result of the pandemic because the face-to-face service industry as well as the hospitality industry are heavily comprised of women (Hannon & Bird, 2020). Most countries are expected to enter or continue in a severe recession as a reflection of the 2020 global recession. Though the Chinese economy seems to be recovering already, the long-term extent and rate of recovery of the economies of different countries remains unknown.

### **Supply Chain Disruption**

The interruption of global trade during COVID-19 occurred as a tertiary effect of supply chain disruption across the world. The global onset of the coronavirus disrupted the balance between supply and demand of products and services due to shutdowns of entire production facilities, shifts in essential needs such as extra healthcare, and changes in consumer trends, such as panic buying and less disposable income. The inconsistent and sudden fluctuations in consumer demand then effected the entire supply chain, which would be impacted further by the bullwhip effect. The bullwhip effect is an economic distribution channel phenomenon in which inventories and assets are allocated inefficiently as a result of demand variability from higher up the supply chain (Nikolopoulos, 2020). The bullwhip theory suggests that a sudden surge in consumer demand will travel upstream to the supply chain; this results in a bottleneck due to limited forecasting and product shortages, which later lead to overproduction (Handfield, 2020). The coronavirus has caused a unique bullwhip in which some sectors experience an attenuation, while others experience amplification (Handfield, 2020). Supply and demand forecasting are also limited during the pandemic due to the inability to quantify many known factors, such as the rate at which the disease spreads, and many unknown factors, such as the long-term severity of the

disease. The onset of the coronavirus has therefore challenged the viability and resilience of globally interconnected supply chain networks.

For example, countries that have a comparative advantage through a specific specialization are especially at risk for the volatility associated with a global pandemic. This is seen in China’s supply chain disruption in the pharmaceutical industry as a result of COVID-19. The disruption ultimately impacted the world supply and demand of the medicines that rely on the Chinese pharmaceutical industry. More specifically, China “accounted for 95% of the US imports of ibuprofen, 91% of hydrocortisone, 40–45% of penicillin and 40% of heparin” (Gruszczynski, 2020, p. 340). As a result, the United States experienced an extreme shortage of medicine at the beginning of the pandemic and revised several trade policies to encourage domestic production. The pandemic will ultimately lead to companies and governments having shorter and more diversified supply chains to help buffer the risks of pandemic shortages and to rely less on other countries for essential needs (Evenett, 2020).

### **Impact on Future International Trade and Relations**

The coronavirus’ impact on international trade will continue to persist and manifest itself in the economic relations of countries around the world. The onset of the virus first caused countries to alter their trade policies in order to curb the number of exports relating to medical supplies and medicines; this is likely to continue in the future on a smaller scale (Evenett, 2020). However, multiple country export limits on both food and medicine have been shown to raise the level and volatility of global pricing of goods, while not decreasing the domestic price by any significant amount. This is likely to lead to increased uncertainty in the global trade arena. Critics of export bans argue that such bans will compromise and erode trust between governments, thus leading to decreased trade and cooperation between nations and even potential

retaliation (Evenett, 2020). More specifically, world trade, and particularly US trade, with China is expected to decrease due to a decline in global trade in favor of self-sufficiency (Tokic, 2020).

### **Trump Administration: Effects on Globalization**

The Trump administration began to remove the United States from the tangled web of the world economy by selectively forming bilateral free trade agreements. Free trade and globalization are typically reinforced by agreements and organizations such as the World Trade Organization (WTO), the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), the US-Korea Free Trade Agreement (KORUS), and the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP). President Trump sought to renegotiate many trade agreements and remove the United States from several organizations in order to restore the American economy and help America be more competitive in the global market. His economic and military policies ultimately impacted American globalization; many believed they hurt globalization while others found it necessary in order to preserve the American economy (Macdonald, 2018). Opinions are mixed whether the impact of his policies and the damage to globalization were offset by the increased economic stability of America prior to COVID-19 (Alden, 2018). Many feel as if President Trump’s trade policy and view of globalization were influenced by a protectionist agenda that led to an aggressive military policy. Critics argue that President Trump heavily advocated against globalization through his implementation of tariffs and trade regulation, and by arguing that the United States needs greater economic and military independence from the rest of the world (Macdonald, 2018).

However, the onset of COVID-19 caused many to praise President Trump’s economic policy and push for independence. While some countries were initially turned off by his move away from globalization, COVID-19 pushed various countries to adopt similar policies in order to rely less on the global market and trade in such unsettling times (Oba, 2020). The coronavirus

pandemic overall hurt many countries that rely on other countries for trade and the production of goods; this is most significantly seen in countries that rely on China for diversification and risk management. Countries, then, began to look at and implement President Trump’s policy of domestically producing goods in order to be more self-sufficient. As a result, the growth towards globalization may be stunted due to the coronavirus and the rejection of complete dependence on international trade and relationships (Oba, 2020). Some argued that the coronavirus would be more effectively contained if the globalization of trade would be temporarily halted; most countries implemented temporary inter-country distancing, even the European Union, which is designed to keep open borders between the participating countries and thus raises significant questions about its unity and challenges its inclusivity (Bilgin, Doker, Karabulut, & Zimmermann, 2020). Many countries also imposed harsher immigration laws, also contributing to the potential decline in globalization as a result of the pandemic.

While many people argued that President Trump is largely responsible for the decline in worldwide globalization, there were clearly other factors that contributed, including Brexit, the coronavirus pandemic, and increased nationalism in various Asian countries like China and India. It was therefore argued that the shift in globalization is not occurring as a result of disintegration for the purpose of detachment from the rest of the world, but rather for the purpose of driving which ideology will be globally dominant (Lind, 2018). As a result, the ideological push that is occurring in Asia through increased nationalism is contributing to the fall of globalization; nationalism in this sense can be defined as the ethnic and religious majority in a country portraying and forcing their own superiority in order to form the identity of the nation (Oba, 2020). This is particularly occurring in China through an isolationist push for totalitarianism and in India through an increased Hindu nationalist sentiment. While China and

India are still playing an active role in global trade, their borders are becoming less porous, especially with the onset of the coronavirus (Oba, 2020). As a result, many argue that this could be contributing to the worldwide move away from globalization towards a more closed-off world.

However, despite all of these factors, globalization has continued to increase on a regional level, even if it is not increasing on a worldwide scale. This is exemplified by the USMCA agreement in North America, increased intra-regional trade in Europe, increased bilateral trade agreements such as one between the European Union and South Korea, and increased trade in Central Asia due to China’s “Belt and Road” trade flow (Cliffe, 2020). As a result, others claimed that President Trump is not quite as “anti-globalist” as some believed, and that globalization could be seen moving in a different direction than it had in previous years due to these various factors. Globalization is moving towards being more of a regional growth and connection between countries and should therefore be also thought of as the regional integration of ideas, cultures, trade, and technology. Globalization, then, is not diminishing or being destroyed by any one of these factors but is changing form to accommodate to events worldwide. This, however, can be dangerous as it could potentially lead to the formation of regional hegemons (Lind, 2018).

### **Implications Looking Forward**

The “America First” policies of the Trump administration have significant implications regarding the international standing and relations of the United States. The global position of the United States was impacted both economically and relationally due to the actions of the Trump administration. The actions of the Trump administration also proved to have repercussions in the 2020 presidential election.

### **Economic Impact**

Many argued that President Trump’s economic and military policies caused a worldwide reaction to the United States, including globally higher taxes on American goods. It also had a negative effect on American allies because the United States continued to face heightened tensions with former alliances and trade partners; the Trump administration faced damaged foreign relations and retaliation from the European Union and other traditionally supportive countries (“Trump Administration Continues Push,” 2018). A decrease in outsourcing and high tariffs caused American consumers to face higher domestic and foreign prices, primarily on goods deriving from the steel and aluminum industries (Słomińska, 2017). President Trump’s policy is criticized by some people as too protectionist and an attack on the free trade movement, resulting in tariffs becoming one of the biggest sources of governmental income for the first time since World War I (Davidson, 2019). However, these consequences were aligned with President Trump’s goal to return manufacturing to the United States in order to better put the American economy first.

On the other hand, many also believed that President Trump’s economic and military policy were beneficial and necessary for the stimulation of the American economy. President Trump’s trade policy was also linked to job creation and a stronger market. Overall, consumers did not face significant backlash from President Trump’s trade policy in the short run due to the protection created by his wide economic expansion, low pre-COVID-19 unemployment rates, and the production of goods at a lower price through increased technological advancements (Davidson, 2019). However, many believe that the costs of tariffs and the weight of COVID-19

will pass on to consumers and the market in the long run, creating an issue that President Trump was forced to face in his 2020 campaign (Election, 2020).

### **Impact on Foreign Relations**

One of the most significant repercussions of the policies of the Trump administration was the impact on the relationships and containment of China, Russia, Turkey, and the Middle East in relation to the United States. Though President Trump applied individual military and economic policies to each country, he overall sought to prevent further collusion of power between these countries that he perceived as a threat to the United States. Over the last five years, Russia, China, Turkey, and the Middle Eastern countries have subtly shown signs of collaboration, both economically and militarily, which has been perceived by many as the beginning stages of the formation of allied forces or cooperative and mutually beneficial collaboration. For instance, about 80% of North Korean trade is done with China (Jacoby, 2018). This poses a threat to the global economic order and military presence of the United States (Sakwa, 2017). As a result, President Trump created his economic and military policies to work hand-in-hand to restore American security and to put “America First” once again in the global economic and military order.

Once inaugurated into office, one of President Trump’s first actions included eliminating the threat of ISIS and the rise of Middle Eastern powers out of a declaration of national security for the United States and its allies. Since then, he kept the Middle East in check through increased taxes and military presence. Second, early in his term President Trump prevented Russia from an Eastern European invasion of former Soviet territories, most notably Ukraine, through economic backlash and military threats. He hindered Putin’s desire for increased global dominance and attempt of a Russian rise to power over Eastern Europe. Later, President Trump

limited China both economically and militarily (Sakwa, 2017). President Trump also discouraged rising powers, such as Turkey, from increased collaboration with China and Russia through threats of tariffs and military pressure. President Trump’s actions with these countries demonstrated how he applied his “America First” policy not only on an economic scale, but to the US military as well, allowing his economic and military policies to cooperate towards the same goal of initiating the unwinding of America from the global web. Many perceived that the fear of a Russo-Chinese alliance with Turkey and the Middle East drove President Trump to apply his economic policy out of a military necessity and goal of American independence. Others criticize these actions as too protectionist and an attack on globalization with too much money attributed to the military (Beržiūnas, 2019).

### **Impact on the 2020 Presidential Election**

President Trump continued to use his “America First” economic policy in his 2020 campaign for reelection. President Trump and President Elect Biden differed on several key policy issues. While President Trump continued to campaign around his 2017 tax law that decreased overall taxes, President Elect Biden proposed significant tax increases. President Trump additionally stated he will continue on the same “America First” trade policy, while President Elect Biden declared he will begin to rebuild the relationships with other countries that he considered to be damaged by the Trump administration and will “rethink the use of tariffs” while deemphasizing trade policy (Election, 2020, p. 6). President Elect Biden also vowed to reenter the global alliances and agreements from which President Trump removed the United States. The 2020 election proved to be one of the most controversial elections in modern history, with Joe Biden ultimately winning the electoral nomination. It is not believed that President

Trump lost the 2020 election because of his “America First” policy but rather because of his perceived lack of COVID-19 policy.

One of the final actions of the Trump administration included a human rights case against China, led by Secretary of State Mike Pompeo. On January 19, 2021, a day before the inauguration of President Biden, Mr. Pompeo gave a declaration of the genocide and crimes against humanity that China was committing through internment and repression of Uighurs and other Muslim ethnic minorities (U.S. Department of State, 2021). Though many believe that President Trump overlooked the human rights case against China, this declaration of genocide against another country by the U.S. Department of State is rare and forces the Biden administration to examine the issues at hand, possibly leading to more sanctions against China (Wong & Buckley, 2021). This body of evidence upon which the declaration was made forces President Biden to take a stance on China to decide whether to put human rights or economics at the forefront of his policy. The declaration also puts pressure on other countries and US allies to consider the investigate of China on a humanitarian basis and to also consider harsher sanctions. The Department of State’s declaration aligns with the argument that China is aggressively pursuing regional hegemony through cultural and economic pressure.

### **Conclusion**

President Trump enacted an “America First” trade policy as means to disintegrate the United States from the worldwide economic web. His policy centered around the implementation of tariffs on countries that he perceived to be an unfair threat to the United States, such as China. The “America First” policy championed the return of manufacturing to the United States and encouraged Americans to purchase domestic, rather than foreign, goods and services. Additionally, President Trump sought to improve the trade status of the US by either removing it

from trade agreements or renegotiating existing ones. The “America First” policy ultimately helped President Trump accomplish his goal of economically decoupling the United States from the rest of the world in order to be more independent and self-sufficient. Many people have praised Trump for this policy, especially since the onset of COVID-19, because they believe it put the United States in a more favorable economic position; others, however, criticized him as too protectionist and his policies as an attack on globalization. Furthermore, President Trump’s military policies aligned with his economic policies as he placed tariffs and military pressure on countries he perceived as a threat. His economic and military policies were exemplified in the US-China conflict. The onset of the coronavirus and President Trump’s response further polarized the country; the coronavirus will likely continue to impact international trade and globalization as countries were forced to alter their trade policies. Many argued that President Trump’s “America First” policy was a direct attack on globalization and label him as too protectionist. Others argued, however, that factors such as increased nationalism, COVID-19, and Brexit have been the lead forces in the shift in globalization.

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