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Review Article

US TRADE POLICY UNDER TRUMP AND THE EROSION OF MULTILATERAL TRADE RULES

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Abstract: This paper examines how the Trump administration (2017–2021 and 2025–present) eroded multilateral trade norms and changed the global economic system. Three interrelated questions are examined through secondary investigation of legal sources, economic science, and policy literature. The study uses main legal sources (WTO agreements, GATT articles, U.S. trade laws, and dispute settlement reports), peer-reviewed academic literature, international organization reports, and contemporaneous news media for qualitative documentary analysis. Liberal institutionalism, hegemonic stability theory, constructivism, global production network (GPN) theory, and legal institutionalism comprise the analytical framework. The findings show a concerted attack on multilateral trade system fundamentals. The Trump administration's paralysis of the WTO Appellate Body, imposition of unilateral "reciprocal tariffs" in April 2025, negotiation of discriminatory bilateral deals, and expansive invocation of national security exceptions directly violate GATT Articles I, II, and XXI, as well as WTO transparency and exclusive jurisdiction provisions. The U.S. blockade of Appellate Body nominations leaves the WTO's dispute settlement system unable to implement its rules. Studies show that the 2018–19 tariffs caused significant welfare losses, regressive distributional impacts that hurt poorer households, and dynamic costs such as policy uncertainty, lower investment, and supply chain disruption. Sectoral dislocation is hidden by neutral employment consequences. The long-term impacts on global industrial networks, including supply chain reorganisation along regional or national lines, are just beginning to be appreciated. The study finds the multilateral trading system in an existential crisis. The study recommendations include U.S. re-engagement with WTO dispute settlement, urgent WTO reform, increased regional initiatives that are multilaterally compatible, and a reinvigorated research agenda on these changes' long-term impacts.

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Introduction

For more than seventy years, the global trading system has been supported by the institutions and agreements established in the wake of the Second World War. Originating from the 1947 General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) and later reinforced by the creation of the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 1995, this multilateral framework was founded on essential principles aimed at promoting stability and prosperity. At the forefront were principles of non-discrimination, represented by the Most-Favoured-Nation (MFN) clause that mandates equal treatment for all trading partners; the binding of tariffs to guarantee predictable market access; and a strong, legally binding dispute settlement mechanism designed to peacefully address conflicts (Jan & Phansalkar, 2019). For many years, the United States served as the main designer and protector of this system, considering it a fundamental element of its foreign policy and a catalyst for worldwide economic development (Keaten & Wiseman, 2019).

The election of Donald Trump in 2016 marked a significant break from the established order, a trend that intensified notably during his following term in office (Blenkinsop, 2019). The Trump administration did not merely adopt protectionist policies within the established framework; it fundamentally questioned the core principles of the multilateral system. In 2019, the U.S. effectively paralysed the World Trade Organization's dispute settlement function by withdrawing from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) and, most critically, blocking the appointment of new judges to the WTO Appellate Body, which rendered the organization unable to enforce its own rules (Keaten & Wiseman, 2019). The "neutering" of the WTO's enforcement arm, allowing trade disputes to be resolved by power instead of rules, marked a significant transition from a commitment to a rules-based system to one influenced by unilateral action and national interest (Blenkinsop, 2019). According to China's ambassador to the WTO, this moment represents "no doubt the most severe blow to the multilateral trading system since its establishment" (as cited in Jan & Phansalkar, 2019, para. 4).

The second Trump administration represented a significant intensification, transitioning from institutional sabotage to the outright breach of fundamental WTO principles. The implementation of extensive "reciprocal tariffs" on foreign goods in April 2025 fundamentally breached the United States' commitments under Article II of the GATT and its MFN obligations by permitting unilateral changes to tariff schedules (Lee & Garcia, 2025). The administration defended these actions, citing national security and an "emergency" stemming from trade deficits, a rationale that critics contend is legally unsustainable according to established WTO jurisprudence (Lee & Garcia, 2025).

Additionally, the U.S. shifted from multilateral negotiations to a series of coercive bilateral "deals," requiring trading partners such as Vietnam, Indonesia, and South Korea to commit to significant investments (including Vietnam's reported $30 billion pledge to acquire Boeing aircraft) and policy concessions in return for tariff relief, thus moving away from the principles of transparency and non-discrimination (Grossman, 2026; "Thailand still negotiating," 2026). In some instances, tariffs seemed to be imposed as a form of political retaliation, with trading partners such as South Africa, Brazil, and Canada encountering extra duties associated with foreign policy disagreements rather than trade deficits ("Section 301," 2026).

This strategy embodies what U.S. Trade Representative Jamieson Greer has referred to as the "Trump Round," a significant transformation of the global economic landscape aimed at emphasising American industrial strength and bilateral influence rather than multilateral agreement (United States Trade Representative [USTR], 2026). The significant erosion of multilateral trade rules has positioned the global trading system at a crucial crossroads. As major economies strive to adjust through interim arbitration mechanisms such as the Multi-Party Interim Appeal Arbitration Arrangement (MPIA), which effectively resolved the first WTO appellate arbitration case in "EU v. Turkey" in 2022 (Zhang & Wang, 2026), or through expanded regional agreements like the CPTPP, the previously unchallenged leadership of the United States has shifted to a position that many perceive as a significant threat to the WTO's future (Kanth, 2025). This analysis will examine the principal actions of the Trump administration, their direct opposition to WTO law, and the significant consequences for the future of global trade governance.

Literature Review

The significant change in U.S. trade policy during the Trump administrations (2017–2021 and 2025–present) and its effects on the multilateral trading system have led to a considerable and swiftly growing collection of academic literature. This review brings together the essential discussions and discoveries across four interrelated thematic areas: (1) legal critiques that emphasise the breach of fundamental WTO principles and the use of national security exceptions; (2) economic assessments of the welfare and distributional impacts of unilateral tariffs; (3) the broader implications for global trade governance, such as institutional paralysis and the shift towards regional alternatives; and (4) new theoretical frameworks aimed at elucidating these changes in global production networks and geopolitical economy.

Legal Critiques: The Assault on Core WTO Principles

A majority of the research explores the legal aspects of U.S. trade policy and concludes that the Trump administration's activities violate WTO core rules. Scholarly consensus recognises three major breaches: MFN violations, tariff violations, and excessive national security exceptions.

Mavroidis (2025) gives a clear legal analysis of the Trump administration's "deals" after the April 2025 "Liberation Day" tariffs. He proves that these bilateral agreements violate the MFN principle in Article I of the GATT by charging different tariffs on the same products from different trading partners. The U.S. violates Article II of the GATT by raising duties beyond Uruguay Round levels. Mavroidis (2025) notes that these deals have not been announced to the WTO, which violates its transparency duties and undermines its exclusive jurisdiction under Article 23.2 of the Dispute Settlement Understanding. He believes that the equilibrium is unsustainable, forcing a future decision between rejecting these treaties and returning to WTO discipline or abandoning the WTO framework (Mavroidis, 2025).

These violations are enabled by the U.S. obstruction of new WTO Appellate Body appointments since 2019. Blenkinsop (2019) and Keaten and Wiseman (2019) show how this "neutering" of the dispute settlement function prevented the WTO from enforcing its own rules, moving trade relations from law to power. Low and Riddell (2025) frame this within a larger set of issues, including negotiating capacity loss, decision-making stasis, and disagreement over special treatment for developing countries. The Trump tariffs have weakened the WTO, although it was already struggling (Low & Riddell, 2025). Jones (2026) attributes this institutional weakening to rising concerns with Appellate Body decisions, which some members, including the U.S., saw as judicial overreach and politicisation, which led to its suspension.

Legal literature emphasises national security exceptions, specifically GATT Article XXI. According to Vranes (2023), this provision has long been considered a "box of Pandora," but recent tensions between Russia, Saudi Arabia, and the U.S. have made this possibility a reality. He believes that Article XXI must be applied proportionally to avoid becoming a "Trump card" that undermines the system (Vranes, 2023). This critique is expanded in the Social Sciences & Humanities Open (2025b) synthesis article, which notes that the expansive use of Section 232 tariffs, justified by "economic security," violates WTO legality established in the Russia – Traffic in Transit panel report, which confirmed that security exceptions are subject to good faith review. Domestic judicial opposition strengthens these arguments' legal weakness. The Social Sciences & Humanities Open (2025b) article and Mavroidis (2025) cite the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Federal Circuit's VOS Selections Inc v. Trump (2025) ruling that the President had exceeded his authority under the International Emergency Economic Powers Act (IEEPA) in imposing universal tariffs, highlighting the conflict between executive action and domestic and international law.

Economic Analysis: Welfare, Distribution, and Uncertainty

A parallel stream of economic work has rigorously recorded the implications of the new tariff regimes, going beyond who "pays" the tariffs to analyse complicated welfare and distributional effects. It is agreed that domestic consumers and importing enterprises bear the expenses of these regulations, while the advantages are unclear.

Based on core trade theory (Krugman, Obstfeld, & Melitz, 2012) and empirical work by Amiti, Redding, and Weinstein (2020), Low and Riddell (2025) conclude that the US pays tariffs through higher prices. The Social Sciences & Humanities Open (2025b) article brings together empirical findings: Fajgelbaum et al. (2020) estimate the welfare losses of the 2018–19 U.S.–China tariffs at US$1.4 billion per month, while Clausing and

Lovely (2024) and Cavallo et al. (2021) show how tariffs and NTBs are passed through to consumers, disproportionately hurting poorer households. Tariff income peaked at US$99.9 billion in 2022, but economic costs outweigh the fiscal advantages (Social Sciences & Humanities Open, 2025b).

Protectionism's dynamic and systemic implications, including policy uncertainty, are frequently highlighted in the research. Caldara et al. (2020) and Handley and Limão (2017) demonstrate that trade-policy uncertainty alone decreases investment and output, preventing long-term commitments. Amiti et al. (2019) find that tariff announcements increase equity market volatility, whereas Grossman et al. (2021) show that tariffs raise search and matching costs when firms rearrange supply chains. The unpredictable and often changing U.S. policy has created uncertainty, restricted trade, and inflation and macroeconomic instability, according to Low and Riddell (2025). The agriculture industry is especially sensitive to retaliation, as Carter and Steinbach (2020) and Grant et al. (2021) found in their assessments of U.S. soybean export collapses. The 2018–19 tariffs had a neutral employment effect, with job losses and gains in diverse industries balancing each other out, according to Autor et al. (2019).

Systemic Consequences: The Transformation of Global Trade Architecture

Beyond immediate legal and economic effects, researchers are studying the global trade architecture's deep and likely irreversible upheaval. The literature extends from harm analysis to state and regional responses to the altered environment.

The Social Sciences & Humanities Open (2025a) essay calls U.S. efforts "systematic dismantling of multilateral institutions." It claims that the meltdown of U.S. trade commitments is spurring the creation of alternative institutional frameworks, particularly regional agreements. The EU–CPTPP collaboration, Asian regionalism's acceleration, and BRICS development show that nations are purposefully innovating rather than fragmenting (Social Sciences & Humanities Open, 2025a). Jones (2026) discusses the EU's strategic challenge and supports this view. After the U.S. retreat from leadership, the EU must choose between systematic WTO reform and cooperative leadership with other like-minded states, improved bilateral trade deals, or "muddling through" (Jones, 2026).

Low and Riddell (2025) warn that the WTO is "beset by widespread non-compliance" and that its dispute settlement mechanism has "substantially failed." They recommend immediate government-led reform to maintain the benefits of multilateral trade cooperation. This systemic study is expanded by Curran (2025) on global manufacturing networks. She claims that the Trump administration's weaponization of economic reliance has changed GPNs' setting. Investment and production geography will be affected by the erosion of international law and trade agreements as a basis for business decision-making (Curran, 2025).

Folsom (2025), in his thorough legal treatise, synthesises these developments and shows how the Trump administration has significantly changed international trade law. From the GATT system to the WTO to the "trade war" and unilateralism of today, he provides a doctrinal framework for comprehending the cumulative legal impact of these changes (Folsom, 2025).

Emerging Theoretical Frameworks: Geopolitics, Decoupling, and the State

Finally, contemporary scholarship is creating new theoretical frameworks to comprehend trade, geopolitics, and state involvement. These models go beyond market-driven models.

GPN theory extension by Curran (2025) is notable. She argues that early GPN frameworks (Coe, Dicken, & Hess, 2008; Yeung & Coe, 2015) acknowledged the state but emphasised its facilitatory role and market-driven change triggers. Currently, the state must be viewed as an active barrier or shaper of GPNs for geopolitical purposes. Curran (2025) synthesises "geopolitical decoupling" (Pavlinek, 2024; Blazek & Lypianin, 2024) and introduces "sustainability-based decoupling," where EU laws push enterprises to separate from unsustainable sources. She claims that the Trump administration's disrespect for bilateral and international accords represents a new sort of state-led disruption that existing models must account for (Curran, 2025).

Vranes (2023) proposes a proportionality-based interpretation of WTO security exceptions as a legal theory. He proposes assessments of fitness and necessity to limit "Trump cards", security clauses used to undermine international economic governance. The Social Sciences & Humanities Open (2025b) article also seeks to bridge economic and legal analysis by arguing that WTO doctrines have failed to adequately integrate economic welfare findings into remedy and exception design.

In conclusion, the literature depicts a complex system in crisis. Legal researchers chronicle rule-breaking, economists calculate costs, and a new generation of theoretical work aims to explain the fundamental structural and geopolitical changes in the global trading order.

Theoretical Framework

The Liberal Institutionalist Tradition Theory

Liberal institutionalist international relations theory is the basis for multilateral trading system analysis. Liberal institutionalism, popularised by Keohane (1984, 1989), holds that international institutions reduce transaction costs, provide information, and establish monitoring and enforcement mechanisms to promote state cooperation. The WTO solves collective action difficulties, allowing governments to obtain mutually beneficial results that would be impossible through unilateral action.

Successful international institution-building includes the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) and its successor, the World Trade Organization (WTO). GATT/WTO principles of non-discrimination (Most-Favoured-Nation and National Treatment), binding tariff commitments, and a dispute settlement process made trade expansion steady and predictable (Jackson, 1997). The system's success is shown by global commerce's rapid growth and peaceful resolution of trade disputes over 70 years.

The Trump administration's activities must be measured against liberal institutionalist norms. This view sees the administration's persistent breach of WTO norms, paralysis of the Appellate Body, and replacement of multilateral discussion with coercive bilateralism as a fundamental break from the post-1945 trade order. Liberal institutionalism helps us appreciate what is lost: a rules-based cooperative structure that, while imperfect, has brought unparalleled wealth and stability. However, liberal institutionalism has limits. It has been criticised for underestimating strength in international institutions (Gruber, 2000) and failing to explain why a hegemonic state would undermine institutions it championed. These constraints provide further theoretical perspectives.

Hegemonic Stability Theory

The complementary perspective of hegemonic stability theory (HST) analyses power's role in creating and maintaining international institutions. HST, developed by Kindleberger (1973) on the Great Depression and Gilpin (1981, 1987) and Krasner (1976), holds that a stable liberal economic order requires a hegemon willing and able to provide public goods like open markets, a stable currency, and a rules-based trading system. The hegemon enforces rules, bears short-term openness costs, and deters free-riding and desertion.

The post-1945 trading order suits well. The US emerged from World War II as the unquestioned hegemon, with the material resources and political resolve to build and preserve a liberal international economic order. The US guaranteed the system for decades, accepting asymmetrical concessions from Europe and Japan during the Cold War, providing the dollar as the global reserve currency, and enforcing trade norms with its market strength (Ikenberry, 2001).

Hegemonic stability theory illuminates the situation by exposing the hegemonic decline paradox. As its strength weakens, the hegemon may be less ready to pay for system upkeep. The hegemon may regard its laws as restrictions on its freedom rather than public goods benefiting all. It may use unilateralism, protectionism, and institutional sabotage to regain advantages (Gilpin, 1987).

Understand the Trump administration's actions via this prism. The US's disengagement from multilateral involvement, unilateral tariffs, and WTO gridlock indicate a belief that the rules-based order no longer serves American interests. The administration's desire for "reciprocity" and framing of trade imbalances as unjust treatment suggest that the U.S. has paid disproportionately while others have benefited. HST sees the current crisis as a natural result of relative decline and hegemonic consensus dissolution.

However, hegemonic stability theory has limits. It has been criticised for its state-centric assumptions, economic determinism, and inability to explain hegemonic behaviour variation (Snidal, 1985). It also provides little insight into other nations' responses to hegemonic decline or trade policy formation dynamics.

Constructivist Theory

The third theoretical lens of constructivist international relations studies emphasises how ideas, norms, and identity shape state behaviour. Constructivism studies how social interaction and shared understandings shape state interests, unlike rationalist theories (Wendt, 1992, 1999). State activity and institutional design are heavily influenced by norms, common expectations about appropriate behaviour (Finnemore & Sikkink, 1998).

Constructivists view the multilateral trading system as a normative order based on non-discrimination, transparency, peaceful conflict resolution, and the rule of law. Trade officials and policymakers worldwide have internalised these principles, defining their view of acceptable trade policy. WTO dispute settlement, a quasi-judicial procedure for trade disputes, institutionalises these rules for the first time (Weiler, 2001).

These principles are challenged by the Trump administration's attack on the multilateral trading system. The administration's rhetoric, framing trade as a zero-sum war, multilateral commitments as sovereignty infringements, and international law as limits on American power, challenges the post-1945 normative order. This administration's activities go beyond policy changes to delegitimise systemic norms.

Understanding U.S. policy responses is also possible using constructivism. EU member states, Canada, Japan, and others have participated in interim arrangements like the MPIA and pursued regional initiatives that are multilaterally compatible to preserve and defend WTO norms (Jones, 2026). States with weaker norms may adjust more easily to the new climate through bilateral treaties and power-based bargaining. Thus, the normative character of the crisis is crucial to understanding its dynamics and its outcomes.

Methodology

This secondary research project examines how the Trump administration has eroded multilateral trade regulations and changed the global economic system. Secondary research, also called desk-based or documentary research, analyses and synthesises existing data, scholarship, and government documentation rather than collecting primary data through surveys, interviews, or experiments (Johnston, 2014). Our method is ideal for our investigation for three reasons. International trade law and policy are document-based, with treaties, legislation, judicial decisions, and government pronouncements as major sources. Second, many events, especially those from 2025–2026, are too close to interview key officials for primary data gathering, although contemporaneous documentary evidence is accessible. Third, because the study question spans law, economics, and political science, secondary sources are needed to synthesise varied literature (Dolowitz, Buckler, & Sweeney, 2008).

The study uses qualitative documentary analysis and selectively integrates quantitative economic data from empirical studies. This style is suitable for studying complex institutional and legal phenomena where words, legal instruments, and policy documents contain meaning (Bowen, 2009). The research will explain the Trump administration's activities and their legal, economic, and systemic effects by synthesising existing material.

The strategy uses legal doctrinal research (Hutchinson & Duncan, 2012) and thematic synthesis (Thomas & Harden, 2008). To provide the legal standard for the Trump administration's activities, the doctrinal component analyzes WTO agreements, GATT articles, U.S. trade legislation, and dispute settlement reports. Thematic synthesis identifies, analyzes, and reports secondary literature themes to integrate legal, economic, and political science findings.

Conclusion

This study examined the Trump administration's deterioration of multilateral trade standards and its impact on the global economic system. The research has traced this transformation from institutional sabotage of the WTO Appellate Body to direct violation of core legal principles through unilateral tariffs and coercive bilateral deals to systemic consequences that are reshaping global trade governance through secondary analysis of legal documents, economic scholarship, and policy literature. This last chapter summarises the study's main findings, draws conclusions, and makes policymaker, international, and scholarly suggestions.

One of the greatest triumphs of international collaboration was the multilateral trading system that developed from WWII. It established norms and institutions that enabled tremendous economic growth, lifted hundreds of millions from poverty, and maintained peace among major countries for 70 years. In the current crisis, the system's erstwhile guarantor is its worst enemy, threatening this legacy.

Still, the story continues. Rebuilding trust, institutions, and rules is possible. The political will to do this is the question. The solution to that question will shape the global trading system and the international order. With escalating international tensions and overlapping crises, the stakes are enormous.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are addressed to the principal actors in the global trading system: policymakers in the United States and other major economies, the WTO and other international institutions, and the scholarly community.

1. **Re-engage with the WTO dispute settlement system.** Paralysis of the Appellate Body is the biggest threat to multilateral trading. The US should immediately stop blocking fresh appointments and negotiate dispute settlement reform. Negotiation should address legitimate concerns about judicial overreach, not institutional sabotage.
2. **Pursue urgent reform of the dispute settlement system.** The current impasse cannot last forever. WTO members should find ways to resolve U.S. concerns about Appellate Body overreach while maintaining binding dispute resolution. The Multi-Party Interim Appeal Arbitration Arrangement (MPIA) shows unique interim remedies (Zhang & Wang, 2026); build on these.

3. **Ensure compatibility and openness.** As regional agreements expand, their architects should ensure compatibility and openness to new members. Instead of creating competing and excluding blocs, develop toward an international consensus.
4. **Conduct comparative analysis of national and regional responses.** This study suggests the range of U.S. trade policy responses, but rigorous comparison analysis is needed. Future research should examine how governments and regions adapt to the changing environment and what factors influence their solutions.

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