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Assessing the Impact of Trump's 'America First' Policy on EU-US Trade Relations (2017-2021): A Realist and Liberal Analysis

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the economic and geopolitical consequences of President Donald Trump's "America First" policy on EU-US trade relations between 2017 and 2021. Through a realist theoretical lens, the paper analyzes three key case studies—steel and aluminum tariffs, the collapse of the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP), and the digital services tax dispute—to assess how unilateral protectionism disrupted transatlantic trade dynamics. Findings reveal that Trump's policies eroded trust in multilateral institutions, triggered retaliatory measures from the EU, and exacerbated sectoral vulnerabilities in both economies. While the EU's targeted responses (e.g., retaliatory tariffs) achieved short-term leverage, long-term cooperation suffered due to divergent regulatory philosophies and institutional paralysis. The study concludes that the "America First" era underscored the fragility of rules-based trade systems and highlights the need for adaptive strategies to reconcile economic interdependence with geopolitical competition.

Keywords America First Policy, EU-US Trade Relations, Protectionism, Trade Wars, Multilateralism, Retaliatory Tariffs, Transatlantic Partnership

INTRODUCTION

The European Union (EU) and the United States (US) have long been key players in the global economy, with their trade relationship forming a cornerstone of transatlantic cooperation (Khan, et al., 2021; Naseer, et al., 2021; Khan & Khan, 2020). The US and EU have long maintained robust economic ties with transatlantic trade, representing a significant portion of global commerce. According to 2024 data, trade between the two economies accounted for approximately \$1.3 trillion in goods and services annually, demonstrating the depth of their interdependence. However, the Trump presidency (2017-2021) has witnessed a marked shift in US policy trade, characterized by rising protectionism (Hutagalung, 2025).

The Transatlantic Economic Council was set up in 2007 to guide efforts to strengthen economic ties between the US and the EU. Negotiations for the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) were formally launched in 2013. However, following 15 rounds of negotiations, the talks were suspended at the end of 2016 due to the change of administration in the US (Schneider-Petsinger, 2020). Additionally, Donald Trump's first presidency (2017-2021) significantly shifted American domestic policies and global relations, driven by his ultra-nationalistic "America First" approach that prioritized domestic economic interests over international cooperation (Saliya, 2025). Trump era 2018, the conflict over US tariffs on steel and aluminium imports was introduced in 2018 (Howald, 2024). Overall, the total bilateral trade between the European Union and the United States was over \$1 trillion in 2021 and these trade disputes and developments have not hurt transatlantic trade and investment (Howald, 2024).

Statement of the Problem

The "America First" policy emphasized unilateralism and significantly disrupted established EU-US trade relationships. By imposing tariffs on key European exports such as steel and aluminium, the Trump administration triggered a series of retaliatory measures from the EU, leading to a trade war that threatened economic stability on both sides of the Atlantic (Kayani, et al., 2023). These actions strained bilateral trade and undermined international cooperation, as the US withdrew from multilateral agreements and institutions that had previously facilitated trade negotiations. This paper explores these disruptions' economic and geopolitical implications, focusing on how the "America First" policy reshaped EU-US trade dynamics during Trump's presidency (Ahmad, et al., 2024).

Objectives of the Study

- To analyse the economic impacts of the "America First" policy on EU-US trade relations.
- To explore case studies that illustrate specific trade disputes and their resolutions.
- To assess the effectiveness of the EU's responses to US trade policy changes.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Framework

The study of international trade relations is often grounded in two dominant

theoretical frameworks: realism and liberalism. These theories provide distinct lenses through which to analyze the dynamics of EU-US trade relations, particularly during the Trump administration's "America First" era (Shah, et al., 2025; Imran, et al., 2023).

Realism, a theory emphasizing sovereignty and pursuing national interests, is particularly relevant for understanding the Trump administration's trade policies. Realists argue that states operate in an anarchic international system where survival and self-interest are paramount (Mearsheimer, 2014). From this perspective, the "America First" policy can be seen as a manifestation of realist principles, as it prioritises economic gains over international cooperation. For example, tariffs on steel and aluminium imports under Section 232 of the Trade Expansion Act of 1962 were justified on national security grounds, reflecting the realist view that states must protect their economic and military capabilities (USTR, 2018). Realists argue that such unilateral actions are inevitable in a system where states cannot rely on international institutions to safeguard their interests (Kayani, et al., 2023; Khan, et al., 2021; Naseer, et al., 2021; Khan & Khan, 2020).

In contrast, liberalism emphasizes the role of international institutions, cooperation, and economic interdependence in fostering peace and stability. Liberal theorists argue that trade relationships, particularly between democratic states like the EU and the US, can create mutual benefits that reduce the likelihood of conflict (Keohane & Nye, 2017). The EU's response to Trump's protectionist policies can be understood through this lens. ul Haq and ur Rehman (2017) for instance, the EU sought to uphold multilateralism and the rules-based international order by engaging in retaliatory tariffs and pursuing dispute resolution through the World Trade Organization (WTO) (European Commission, 2018). Liberals would argue that the EU's actions aimed to preserve the long-term benefits of economic interdependence, even in the face of unilateral US actions.

The tension between these two theoretical frameworks is evident in the trade disputes during Trump's presidency. While realism explains the US's unilateral and protectionist approach, liberalism provides insight into the EU's efforts to maintain cooperation and uphold international norms. This theoretical dichotomy helps to contextualize the broader geopolitical implications of the "America First" policy, particularly its impact on the transatlantic alliance.

In summary, realism and liberalism offer complementary perspectives for analyzing trade relations during the Trump era. Realism highlights the US's pursuit of national interests through unilateral actions, while liberalism underscores the EU's commitment to multilateralism and economic interdependence. By examining these theories, this paper aims to provide a nuanced understanding of the forces that shaped EU-US trade dynamics from 2017 to 2021.

Historical Context

The US and EU have cooperated on a range of important issues, including economic recovery and defence (Centre for European Studies, 2025). According to the Council of the European Union, the European Union and the United States have the most significant bilateral trade and investment relationship and the most integrated economic relationship globally. Together, they represent almost 30% of global trade

in goods and services and 43% of global GDP (Council of the European Union, 2023). The European Union (EU) has historically relied on its strong trade relationship with the United States as a cornerstone of its economic strategy (Akhtar & Kayani, 2024; Akhtar, et al., 2020; Anwar, et al., 2019). This transatlantic partnership, underpinned by mutual investment and shared values, has contributed significantly to economic growth on both sides (Hutagalung, 2025). The US maintained a protectionist stance until the 1940s, imposing tariffs to shield domestic industries from foreign competition, particularly from European manufacturers (Webb, 2023).

The Second World War reshaped international affairs. The rise of the USSR and Iron Curtain between East and West Europe resulted in divided allegiances across Europe (Centre for European Studies, 2025) in 1953, years immediately after the war began forging an economic union in the European Coal and Steel Community, which transitioned into relations with the European Economic Community (EEC) after its founding in 1957 (Stokes, 2022). In addition, the US attempted to promote European growth; this act of the US becoming a player in Europe's political economy would later repeat itself in the post-World War II era. By introducing partnerships with the central US banks, loans and credits were served for the European economy (Atilgan, 2008).

According to the Azhar, Iqbal and Imran (2025) moreover, the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) was established in 1948 (Webb, 2023). Additionally, the US Secretary of State George Marshall, in proposing American economic relief and rebuilding aid for war-torn Europe, what became known as the Marshall Plan (Stokes, 2022) and later the World Trade Organization (WTO), facilitated reduced tariffs, increased trade volume, and enhanced their economic ties (Webb, 2023).

Furthermore, throughout the late 1950s, 1960s and early 1970s, the US had a small trade surplus with the European Community. 1957, for example, America ran a \$2.4 billion surplus in goods trade with Western Europe (Zhang, et al., 2023; Stokes, 2022). However, at the 1995 summit in Madrid, the US and EU formally adopted the New Transatlantic Agenda (NTA) to provide a new foundation for the partnership (Ahearn, 2008).

Moreover, the growing competitiveness of European products, partly attributable to the continent's economic integration and the expansion of the European project, meant that by 1997, the US was running nearly a \$17 billion annual merchandise trade deficit with the European Union. By 2005, that deficit had increased more than tenfold, likely due to the slow economic slowdown in Europe (Rana, et al., 2022; Rana, et al., 2021; Rana, 2015). In the wake of the 2008-2009 financial crisis, before ebbing a bit for four years (Stokes, 2022) and in April 2007, the leaders of the European Union (EU) and the United States of America (United States) committed their governments to increase the efficiency and transparency of Transatlantic Economic Cooperation (TEC), and to accelerate the reduction and elimination of barriers to international trade and investment with the ultimate objective of achieving a barrier-free transatlantic market (Office of the Press Secretary, United States Department of State, 2008)

However, the relationship has not been without its challenges. For instance, agriculture has traditionally been a primary source of economic tension between the United States and the European Union. The dispute over the EU's banana regime has been among the most contentious of the 1990s, where the EU's preferential trade agreements with former colonies clashed with US interests, leading to a prolonged trade dispute that was eventually resolved through WTO arbitration (Patterson, 2001). Similarly, disagreements over genetically modified organisms (GMOs) and hormone-treated beef highlighted the difficulties of aligning regulatory standards across the Atlantic as 1989 the European Union instituted a ban on US meat treated with growth hormones (Rathke, 2017). However, Donald Trump's election in 2016 marked a significant departure from this cooperative approach. His administration prioritized unilateral actions and protectionist policies, challenging the historical norms of EU-US trade relations (Rana, et al., 2022; Rana, et al., 2021; Rana, 2015).

Current Studies and Findings

Summary of Key Literature on Trump's Trade Policies and Their Implications

Recent studies have extensively analysed the impact of Trump's "America First" trade policies on global trade dynamics, mainly focusing on the EU-US relationship. According to Hufbauer and Jung (2019), the imposition of tariffs on steel and aluminium under Section 232 of the Trade Expansion Act of 1962 marked a significant shift in US trade policy, leading to a decline in bilateral trade between the EU and the US. The authors argue that these tariffs disrupted established supply chains and triggered retaliatory measures from the EU, resulting in a trade war that harmed industries on both sides of the Atlantic. Similarly, Bown (2020) highlights that the Trump administration's frequent use of national security justifications for tariffs undermined the credibility of the World Trade Organization (WTO), as these justifications are difficult to challenge under existing WTO rules.

The broader implications of Trump's trade policies have also been a recent research focus. Stokes (2018) argues that the erosion of trust between the EU and the US weakened the transatlantic alliance, which has historically been a cornerstone of the liberal international order. This sentiment is echoed by Rodrik (2018), who suggests that the rise of protectionism under Trump reflects a broader trend of declining support for globalization, particularly in advanced economies. Rodrik's work emphasizes that protectionist policies, while addressing domestic economic grievances, often lead to increased geopolitical tensions and a breakdown in international cooperation (Bashir, Saba & Hussain, 2023; Fatima, & Saba, 2020; Fatima, et al., 2020).

Analysis of Existing Frameworks for Understanding the Impact of Protectionism on International Relations

Existing frameworks for analysing the impact of protectionism on international relations often draw on theories of economic nationalism and realism. Economic nationalism, described by Helleiner (2021), posits that states prioritize domestic economic interests over international cooperation, often at the expense of global

economic stability. This framework helps understand the Trump administration's "America First" policies, which sought to protect US industries through tariffs and other trade barriers.

Shahzadi, Khan, Toor, and ul Haq (2018) on the other hand, Realist theories emphasize the role of power and national interest in shaping international trade relations. Mearsheimer (2014) argues that in an anarchic international system, states are compelled to act in their self-interest, often leading to zero-sum outcomes. This perspective helps explain the unilateral nature of Trump's trade policies and the EU's reactive measures, such as retaliatory tariffs and efforts to strengthen trade ties with other regions like Asia (European Commission, 2018).

In addition to these theoretical frameworks, liberal institutionalism offers insights into the role of international organizations in mitigating the effects of protectionism. Keohane and Nye (2017) argue that institutions like the WTO provide mechanisms for resolving trade disputes and maintaining a rules-based international order. However, the Trump administration's disregard for multilateral institutions highlights the limitations of this framework in an era of rising protectionism (Shehzad, Khan & Khan, 2024; Tariq, Khan & Atta, 2024; Noreen, et al., 2023).

Gaps in the Literature

While existing studies have provided valuable insights into the economic and geopolitical impacts of Trump's "America First" policy, several gaps in the literature remain, particularly regarding its long-term effects on EU-US trade relations. First, there is a need for more research on how the erosion of trust between the EU and the US will affect future trade negotiations. As Stokes (2018) notes, the transatlantic alliance has been a cornerstone of the liberal international order, and the long-term consequences of its weakening are not yet fully understood.

Second, the role of international organizations in mediating trade disputes during this period has been underexplored. While some studies, such as Bown (2020), have examined the limitations of the WTO in addressing unilateral trade actions, more research is needed to assess how international institutions can adapt to an era of rising protectionism (Bashir, Saba & Hussain, 2023; Fatima, & Saba, 2020; Fatima, et al., 2020). Finally, there is a lack of comprehensive studies on the sectoral impacts of Trump's trade policies, particularly in emerging industries such as digital trade and green technology. As Rodrik (2018) highlights, the global economy is undergoing significant structural changes, and the long-term effects of protectionism on these sectors remain unclear. Addressing these gaps will be crucial for understanding the full implications of the "America First" policy on EU-US trade relations.

FINDINGS

CASE STUDY 1

Steel and Aluminium Tariffs

Overview of Tariff Impositions and Their Immediate Effects on Trade

In March 2018, the Trump Administration imposed tariffs of 25% on steel and 10% on aluminium imports under Section 232 of the Trade Expansion Act of 1962, citing national security concerns (Malik, et al., 2025; Shah & Saba, 2024; USTR, 2018).

These tariffs were part of the broader "America First" policy, which aimed to protect domestic industries from foreign competition and reduce the US trade deficit. As one of the largest suppliers of steel and aluminium to the US, the EU was significantly affected by these measures. In 2017, the EU exported approximately \$7.7 billion worth of steel and aluminium to the US, making it one of the top tariff targets (European Commission, 2018).

The immediate effects of the tariffs were felt across multiple sectors. US manufacturers, particularly in the automotive and construction industries, faced higher input costs due to the increased steel and aluminium prices. According to a study by the Peterson Institute for International Economics (PIIE), the tariffs led to a 1.5% increase in the price of steel and a 2.2% increase in the price of aluminium in the US, which in turn raised production costs for downstream industries (Hufbauer & Jung, 2019). This resulted in job losses and reduced competitiveness for US manufacturers as they struggled to absorb the higher costs or pass them on to consumers (Sarfranz, Raja, & Malik, 2022; Raja, Raju, & Raja, 2021; Sarfranz, Raju, & Aksar, 2018).

For EU exporters, the tariffs created significant disruptions. European steel producers, particularly in countries like Germany and Italy, faced a sharp decline in exports to the US. The European Steel Association (EUROFER) reported that steel exports to the US fell by 30% in the first year following the imposition of tariffs (EUROFER, 2019). This decline was particularly damaging for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) that relied heavily on the US market. The aluminium sector also experienced similar challenges, with exports to the US dropping by 20% in the same period (European Commission, 2019).

Analysis of EU's Retaliatory Measures and Their Impact on Specific Industries

In response to the US tariffs, the EU implemented retaliatory measures targeting \$3.2 billion worth of US goods, including bourbon, motorcycles, and agricultural products such as soybeans and corn (European Commission, 2018). These measures were designed to exert economic pressure on the US while minimizing harm to EU consumers and industries. The EU's retaliation was carefully calibrated to target products that were politically sensitive in the US, particularly those produced in states that were key to Trump's electoral base (Malik, et al., 2025; Shah & Saba, 2024).

The impact of the EU's retaliatory tariffs was felt most acutely in the US agricultural sector. For example, the tariffs on soybeans significantly affected US farmers, as the EU was one of the largest importers of American soybeans. According to the American Farm Bureau Federation (AFBF), soybean exports to the EU fell by 27% in 2018, leading to a sharp decline in prices and farm incomes (AFBF, 2019). Similarly, the tariffs on bourbon affected producers in Kentucky, a state that was politically important to the Trump administration. The Distilled Spirits Council of the United States (DISCUS) reported that bourbon exports to the EU declined by 18% in 2018, resulting in lost revenue for distilleries and job losses in the industry (Sarfranz, Raja, & Malik, 2022; Raja, Raju, & Raja, 2021; Sarfranz, Raju, & Aksar, 2018).

The EU's retaliatory measures also had broader economic and geopolitical implications. By targeting politically sensitive industries, the EU sought to increase

the domestic political costs of the US tariffs, pressuring the Trump administration to reconsider its trade policies. This partially successful strategy led to negotiations between the EU and the US, culminating in a temporary truce in 2021. Under this agreement, the Biden administration suspended EU steel and aluminium tariffs in exchange for a quota system that limited the volume of EU exports to the US (Politico, 2021). However, the long-term effects of this agreement remain uncertain, as the underlying tensions between the two trading partners have not been fully resolved.

Broader Implications for EU-US Trade Relations

The steel and aluminium tariffs case study highlights the fragility of EU-US trade relations in the face of unilateral protectionist policies. The tariffs disrupted trade flows and undermined the rules-based international trading system that the EU and the US had historically supported. While effective in the short term, the EU's retaliatory measures also raised concerns about the potential for escalating trade wars and the erosion of the transatlantic alliance (Rehan, et al., 2024).

Moreover, the case study underscores the importance of multilateralism in resolving trade disputes. The EU's decision to pursue dispute resolution through the World Trade Organization (WTO) reflected its commitment to upholding international trade rules, even as the US sought to bypass these institutions. However, the limited effectiveness of the WTO in addressing the US tariffs highlights the challenges of maintaining a rules-based system in an era of rising protectionism.

CASE STUDY 2

The Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP)

Examination of the Stalled Negotiations and Implications for Future Trade Relations

The Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP), launched in 2013, was envisioned as a comprehensive trade agreement between the European Union (EU) and the United States (US) aimed at deepening economic ties by reducing tariffs, harmonizing regulatory standards, and promoting investment flows. The negotiations were seen as a way to strengthen the transatlantic alliance and counterbalance China's rising economic influence and other emerging markets (European Commission, 2016). However, by 2016, the TTIP negotiations had effectively stalled, and the election of Donald Trump in the US marked the end of any immediate prospects for the agreement.

The stalling of TTIP negotiations can be attributed to several factors. First, there were significant differences in regulatory approaches between the EU and the US, particularly in food safety, environmental standards, and data protection. For example, the EU's precautionary principle, which requires proof that products are safe before being marketed, clashed with the US's more risk-based approach, allowing products to be sold unless proven harmful (De Ville & Siles-Brügge, 2019). These regulatory differences proved challenging to reconcile, as both sides were reluctant to compromise on standards deeply embedded in their domestic legal and cultural frameworks.

Second, the scope of the agreement became a point of contention. The TTIP

was intended to cover traditional trade issues such as tariffs and more complex areas like intellectual property rights, public procurement, and investor-state dispute settlement (ISDS) mechanisms. The inclusion of ISDS, in particular, was highly controversial, as it would have allowed corporations to sue governments over regulations that harmed their profits. Critics argued that this would undermine national sovereignty and prioritize corporate interests over public welfare (Rodrik, 2018). These concerns led to widespread opposition to the TTIP, particularly in Europe, where civil society groups and political parties mobilized against the agreement (Waqas, Khan & saeed, 2024; Zafar, et al., 2023).

The implications of the stalled TTIP negotiations for future EU-US trade relations are significant. Without a comprehensive trade agreement, the EU and the US have been forced to rely on existing frameworks, such as the World Trade Organization (WTO), to address trade disputes. However, the WTO's mechanisms have proven inadequate for resolving emerging issues such as digital trade, data privacy, and climate-related regulations (Hamilton & Quinlan, 2018). The failure of the TTIP also reflects a broader trend of declining support for multilateral trade agreements, as both the EU and the US have increasingly turned to bilateral or regional trade deals.

Impact of Political Rhetoric on Public Perception and Negotiations

The TTIP negotiations were shaped by technical and regulatory challenges and the political rhetoric surrounding the agreement. In the US, the rise of populist sentiment during the 2016 presidential election campaign contributed to a growing scepticism of free trade agreements. Donald Trump's "America First" platform, which criticized trade deals like the TTIP for favouring other countries at the expense of American workers, resonated with voters who felt left behind by globalization (Stokes, 2018). This rhetoric created a hostile environment for the TTIP, as the Trump administration prioritized bilateral trade deals over multilateral agreements.

In Europe, the TTIP faced similar criticism from both the left and the right. Left-wing parties and environmental groups argued that the agreement would lead to a "race to the bottom" in regulatory standards, particularly in food safety and environmental protection areas. Right-wing populist parties, on the other hand, framed the TTIP as a threat to national sovereignty and cultural identity (De Ville & Siles-Brügge, 2019). This widespread opposition made it politically difficult for European leaders to continue supporting the negotiations, particularly in the face of growing public protests and anti-TTIP campaigns.

The impact of political rhetoric on public perception was particularly evident in the media coverage of the TTIP. In the EU and the US, the agreement was often portrayed as a secretive and undemocratic process prioritizing corporate interests over those of ordinary citizens. This narrative was fueled by leaks of negotiation documents, which critics used to highlight the potential risks of the agreement (Rodrik, 2018). As a result, public opinion on the TTIP became increasingly hostile, with polls showing that most Europeans and Americans opposed the agreement by 2016 (European Commission, 2016).

The stalled TTIP negotiations also had broader implications for the

transatlantic relationship. The failure to reach an agreement signalled a shift in the EU-US trade relationship from cooperation to competition. This shift was further exacerbated by the Trump administration's unilateral trade actions, such as tariffs on steel and aluminium, which undermined trust between the two trading partners (Hufbauer & Jung, 2019). The lack of progress on the TTIP also created a vacuum in transatlantic trade policy, which has yet to be filled.

Broader Implications for Future Trade Relations

The TTIP case study highlights the challenges of negotiating comprehensive trade agreements in an era of rising populism and economic nationalism. The failure of the TTIP underscores the importance of transparency and public engagement in trade negotiations and the need to address the legitimate concerns of those who feel left behind by globalization. It also raises questions about the future of EU-US trade relations, particularly in a changing global economy.

The EU and the US must find new ways to address emerging trade issues, such as digital trade, data privacy, and climate change, which the TTIP did not fully cover. The Biden administration's more multilateral approach to trade policy offers an opportunity to revive transatlantic cooperation. Still, significant challenges remain, particularly in rebuilding trust and addressing the regulatory differences that derailed the TTIP (Politico, 2021).

In conclusion, the stalled TTIP negotiations serve as a cautionary tale about the complexities of modern trade agreements and the importance of addressing both technical and political challenges. While the TTIP may no longer be on the table, its legacy continues to shape the future of EU-US trade relations.

CASE STUDY 3

The Digital Services Tax

Role of the EU's Digital Tax Initiatives in Response to US Tech Companies

The rapid growth of digital economies and the dominance of US tech companies such as Google, Amazon, Facebook, and Apple (GAFA) have prompted the European Union (EU) and its member states to address the challenges of taxing digital services. Traditional tax systems, which are based on physical presence, have struggled to capture the value created by digital companies that operate across borders with minimal physical infrastructure. In response, several EU countries, led by France, proposed a Digital Services Tax (DST) to ensure that tech companies pay their fair share of taxes in the countries where they generate revenue (OECD, 2020).

Two main concerns drove the EU's digital tax initiatives. First, there was a growing recognition that US tech companies benefited from tax avoidance strategies, such as profit shifting to low-tax jurisdictions like Ireland. This practice allowed these companies to pay minimal taxes in the countries where they operated despite generating significant revenues. For example, in 2019, Amazon reported €44 billion in revenue across Europe but paid only €250 million in taxes, a tax rate of less than 1% (Financial Times, 2020). Second, the EU sought to address the uneven playing field between traditional businesses, which are subject to local tax laws, and digital companies, which often operate with minimal tax obligations.

In 2018, the European Commission proposed a 3% tax on the revenues of digital companies, with global revenues exceeding €750 million and EU revenues exceeding €50 million. This proposal was part of a broader effort to create a fair and equitable tax system for the digital economy (European Commission, 2018). However, the proposal faced resistance from some EU member states, particularly Ireland and Luxembourg, which have benefited from hosting the European headquarters of many US tech companies. As a result, the EU-wide DST was not adopted, leading several member states, including France, Italy, and Spain, to implement their national digital taxes.

Analysis of How These Policies Have Led to Trade Tensions

The EU's digital tax initiatives, notably France's DST, sparked significant trade tensions with the United States. The Trump administration viewed these taxes as discriminatory against US tech companies and threatened to impose retaliatory tariffs on French goods, including wine, cheese, and luxury products (USTR, 2019). In July 2019, the US launched a Section 301 investigation into France's DST, arguing that it unfairly targeted US companies and violated international tax principles. The investigation concluded that the French DST was "unreasonable, discriminatory, and burdensome" and proposed up to 100% tariffs on \$2.4 billion of French goods (USTR, 2020).

The trade tensions between the EU and the US over digital taxes highlight the broader challenges of regulating the digital economy in a globalized world. On the one hand, the EU's efforts to tax digital services reflect legitimate concerns about tax fairness and the need to modernize tax systems to reflect the realities of the digital economy. On the other hand, the US has argued that unilateral digital taxes create double taxation and undermine the multilateral efforts led by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) to develop a global solution to digital taxation (OECD, 2020).

The impact of these trade tensions has been felt across multiple sectors. For example, the threat of US tariffs on French wine led to a sharp decline in exports to the US, with French wine producers reporting a 50% drop in sales in some markets (Financial Times, 2020). Similarly, the uncertainty surrounding digital taxes has created challenges for US tech companies operating in Europe, as they face the prospect of increased tax liabilities and regulatory scrutiny.

Broader Implications for EU-US Trade Relations

The digital services tax case study underscores the complexities of regulating the digital economy in a way that balances the interests of different stakeholders. While legitimate concerns about tax fairness drove the EU's digital tax initiatives, they also highlighted the risks of unilateral action in a globalized economy. The trade tensions between the EU and the US over digital taxes reflect broader disagreements about regulating the digital economy and allocating taxing rights fairly and equitably. The OECD's ongoing efforts to develop a global solution to digital taxation offer a potential way forward. In 2021, the OECD reached a historic agreement among 130 countries to establish an international minimum corporate tax rate of 15% and reallocate taxing rights to ensure that multinational companies pay taxes in the

countries where they generate profits (OECD, 2021). While this agreement represents a significant step forward, its implementation remains uncertain, particularly in the face of political and economic challenges.

In conclusion, the digital services tax case study highlights the tensions between national tax policies and global economic integration. The EU's efforts to tax digital services reflect the challenges of regulating the digital economy fairly and equitably. At the same time, the US's response underscores the risks of unilateral action in a globalized world. The EU and the US must work together to address these challenges and develop a cooperative framework for regulating the digital economy.

International Involvement and Mediation

Evaluation of the Role of International Organizations in Mediating Trade Disputes

During the Trump era, international organizations, particularly the World Trade Organization (WTO), acted as critical but marginal players mediating EU-US trade disputes. When addressing unilateral actions under national security claims, the WTO's dispute settlement mechanism was challenged, strengthening its dependency on sovereign commitments (Bown, 2020). The US used Section 232 to impose steel and aluminium tariffs by arguing they are necessary for national security, a justification that is hard to oppose under WTO rules (USTR, 2018). By undermining the sovereignty of the WTO, panels historically avoid ruling on national security issues because they fear undermining the sovereignty of national governments in the wake of its historically avoiding such topics (Pauwelyn, 2019).

However, the OECD also tried to lower the tensions in the digital tax dispute. However, its Inclusive Framework on Base Erosion and Profit Shifting (BEPS) had identified resolving digital taxation as a multilateral problem, and progress was slow in the face of European Union-led unilateral measures opposed by the United States (OECD, 2020). While the OECD's global tax Breakthrough 2021 was a milestone, the agreement is questionable to implement as its voluntary nature limits its application to powerful states (Avi-Yonah, 2021).

Successes and Challenges Faced by the EU in International Forums

Partial success was achieved by using the WTO to legitimize the EU's retaliatory tariffs against US steel and aluminium measures to pressure the US to negotiate (European Commission 2019). Ambiguity in law sometimes leads to disputes, which sometimes need to be resolved at appeal; however, the Trump administration's blocking of most of the WTO Appellate Body paralyzed the dispute resolution system, leaving the EU without a definitive appeals system (Elsig & Pollack, 2020).

The EU advocated for multilateralism in the G7 and G20 but could not confront US unilateralism. The EU could not rally support against the US tariffs, as the consensus was often elusive because of divergent national interests (Meunier & Morin, 2020). Suppose compromise to adapt to changing circumstances must be found. In that case, adaptability can lead to fragility in multilateral cooperation as the EU partners with Japan to address unfair trade practices on an ad hoc coalition basis (Baldwin & Evenett, 2020).

Comparative Analysis

Common Themes in Trade Disputes and Resolutions

Based on the three case studies—steel/aluminium tariffs, TTIP collapse, and digital services tax—we compare the three cases under which these recurring themes can be seen in a comparative aspect to EU-US trade conflicts in the era of Trump. The US approach was first defined as unilateralism with Section 232 tariffs and rejecting multilateral frameworks such as TTIP (Hufbauer & Jung, 2019). Conversely, the EU has too frequently based itself on rules-based multilateralism and has responded with targeted tariffs, seeking WTO validation (European Commission, 2019). Second, outcomes were shaped by sectoral vulnerabilities that the EU targeted (US retaliation against US agriculture (soybeans, bourbon); US tariffs against EU steel but not the EU's; Bown (2020)). Geopolitical signalling was also influential; both sides calibrated measures to impose the maximum political pressure; for instance, the EU targeted Trump-supporting states, as in Politico (2021).

Effectiveness of EU Strategies

In the steel/aluminium dispute, the EU's retaliatory tariffs successfully forced the US to negotiate, leading to the 2021 quota agreement (Politico, 2021). However, its multilateral advocacy was only partially successful. The WTO legitimized the EU's countermeasures but weakened the resolution (Elsig & Pollack, 2020). After disagreeing on regulatory divergence and public opposition to the TTIP negotiations, the EU's efforts to reconcile the demands for transparency with the complexity of trade diplomacy went unfulfilled (De Ville & Siles-Brügge, 2019). These unilateral measures by the EU triggered OECD-led global reforms in the digital tax conflict but risked long-lasting trade wars (OECD, 2021).

The EU's targeted retaliation against US unilateralism was more effective than broad multilateralism. However, stability in the long term will need stronger institutional frameworks to govern issues such as digital trade and climate policy (Rodrik, 2018).

CONCLUSION

Regarding how Trump's 'America First' stance on trade had impacted EU-US trade relations (2017–2021), it argues that this can be broken down into three major economic and geopolitical points (Azhar, 2024; Azhar, et al., 2022). The first of these examples was unilateral protectionism under Trump in the form of steel/aluminium tariffs (Section 232) or the rejection of multilateral agreements like TTIP that damaged transatlantic trade and, in turn, EU retaliatory measures damaging both economies (Hufbauer & Jung, 2019). Secondly, as trust in multilateral institutions such as the WTO has eroded, so has dispute resolution in such cases, with the digital tax standoff being a significant example (Bown, 2020). Third, the EU's considerable response to economic defence—metamaterial tariffs, temporary coalition ad hoc and unilateral digital taxes all pose issues in balancing idealism toward multilateralism and the practice of economic defence (De Ville & Siles-Brügge, 2019).

Case studies highlighted sectoral asymmetries in that US tariffs hit EU manufacturing harder. At the same time, the US response was aimed at EU agriculture

and tech, and both economies are vulnerable to similar origins of tariff pain (European Commission, 2019). In terms of politics, though the EU's trade war will convince the US to bring a 2021 truce on steel tariffs, long-term cooperation is hindered because the EU and US health and safety regulations go to two different places (Politico, 2021). Finally, these findings demonstrate how, and to the extent that, "America First" derailed the story of transatlantic economic governance. Thus, the rules-based order also turned into a trial rocket.

Implications for Future Trade Policy

In the Trump era, we have seen a need for plenty of adaptive policies in a fragmented geopolitical landscape. Afterwards, the EU and the US should strengthen multilateral frameworks by reviving the WTO reform of dispute and the OECD's global tax agreement (OECD, 2021) and prevent one side from unilaterally escalating. The second is sector-specific cooperation, such as green tech or digital standards, in the US-EU Trade and Technology Council (TTC) (White House, 2021).

However, challenges persist. The EU's use of 'open strategic autonomy' may not turn up well-calibrated between market access and self-sufficiency mirroring America's protectionism (Meunier, Morin, 2020). Therefore, US trade policy is volatile and suspicious of multilateralism (Stokes, 2022). Indeed, both have to be transparent and criticize what drove TTIP under (Rodrik, 2018).

The second important lesson is that broad retaliation (i.e., EU retaliation in general or retaliation to steel tariffs in particular) is better than targeted reciprocity (i.e., EU reaction to steel tariffs). To avoid protracted trade wars, the right balance between deterrence and de-escalation channels must be found, especially in conflicts like those between the US and France over digital tax (Azhar, 2024; Azhar, et al., 2022).

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Future work should further investigate the long-term effects of Trump's America First policy on EU-US trade relations in various domains. Secondly, the scholars are advised to explore the disparities between the trade impacts across regions and sectors, especially if the impacts on some sectors or regions of the trade, such as agriculture, manufacturing, and technology, had a damaging effect. Such studies could show unequal economic impact and more appropriate policy responses. The second reason is that emerging technologies such as artificial intelligence, green energy, and digital services have become more prominent in trade dynamics transformation than ever and should be taken into consideration to a greater extent. Third, psychological and political aspects of trade policy can provide insights into the role of domestic politics in influencing international trade strategies, i.e., EU public opinion elbows and electoral effects in the US and EU, among others. Thirdly, comparative analyses of the rest of the alternative dispute resolution mechanisms (beyond the WTO) could be more effective in resolving future trade conflicts within a more multipolar world. While filling these gaps is in the interest of a high-level academic debate, this also contributes to formulating valuable policy-making criteria for managing transatlantic relationships characterized by superspeed development.

In the "America First" era, the EU-US trade relations were underlined by vulnerabilities and resilience. Despite the strain placed on transatlantic partnerships by Trump's policies, their mission was to reaffirm their reliability as economies whose welfare depends greatly on global trade amidst political chaos. This study is about an important tension between economic cooperation and political unilateralism in the studied conflicts, steel tariffs and digital taxation, a dynamic which will continue in an age of increasing geopolitical competition. This means the EU and US should do it in a way that allows their continued need to preserve many of the multilateral systems that have been the kernel of their shared prosperity for generations. The Trade and Technology Council (TTC) promises collaboration channels but will only succeed with continued political will and public support. Two, The transatlantic relationship is finally essential to global stability, and the future of that relationship, in large part, will depend on both sides' willingness to adjust to new realities without diminishing rules-based trading principles of open trade.

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