

Populism in Trump's China Trade Policy: An Analysis Focused on the "America First" Narrative

Mingyan Jiang

Department of Diplomacy, China Foreign Affairs University, Beijing, China

jiangmingyan@mail.cfau.edu.cn

Abstract. This analysis investigates populism in Donald Trump's China trade policy through the lens of his "America First" mantra. It initiates with defining populism and its manifestation in Trump's rhetoric. The "America First" agenda, with its historical roots recontextualized, embodies economic protectionism, anti-globalism, anti-immigration, and a preference for non-interference in international conflicts. Trump's discourse frames globalization and unfair trade practices, particularly those attributed to China, as threats to American prosperity and security. The study dissects how this narrative was operationalized to justify aggressive trade actions, including tariffs and efforts to revise trade agreements, aiming to reclaim control over the U.S. economy amidst perceived imbalances. The study then scrutinizes the populist execution of this policy, focusing on trade war, technology competition, and economic decoupling. Its implications on China, the US, and their relations are assessed, identifying the impacts on China's export sector, technological development, and global diplomatic efforts. Conversely, it discusses the repercussions for the U.S. economy, particularly in agriculture and manufacturing, and the broader effects on international trade relations and the global economic order. The conclusion underscores the multifaced consequences of the "America First" policy, emphasizing the need for diplomatic engagement, strategic recalibration, and a reevaluation of populism's role in international economic relations.

Keywords: The Trump administration, trade policy, populism, America First, Sino-US relations.

1. Introduction

The ascendancy of populist movements across the globe in recent years has reshaped the political landscape and influenced policy agendas, particularly in international trade. A prominent manifestation of this trend was observed in the United States under President Donald J. Trump, whose administration adopted a starkly protectionist stance, epitomized by the "America First" narrative. This policy approach was particularly evident in the U.S.'s trade with China, which became a focal point of tension and dramatic policy shifts.

This study aims to analyze the role of populism in shaping Trump's China trade policy, with a specific focus on the America First narrative. By examining the discourse, policies, and their outcomes, the study seeks to understand how populist rhetoric was utilized to mobilize support for a more aggressive and protectionist stance toward China. It further explores several manifestations of Trump's trade policy towards China and its impact on the relations between the two nations.

This study employs a close examination of official statements, speeches, and policy documents to decipher the discursive constructs of the America First narrative and how they were deployed to justify trade actions against China, to examine the populist elements within Trump's China trade policy and their impact on policy formulation and execution and understand populism's role in shaping international economic relations. It provides critical insights into the economic and political ramifications of protectionist measures, the reconfiguration of global trade dynamics, and the broader implications for international diplomacy and financial policy-making. The study offers valuable analysis for academics and policymakers navigating the complexities of international trade in the era of rising nationalism.

The study is meticulously organized into sections that systematically analyze the populism embodied in Trump's China trade policy through the "America First" narrative. It is initiating with the formation

and characteristics of the “America First” populist narrative, including the theoretical framework on populism and interpretation of “America First”. The following part scrutinizes the practice of populism in Trump’s China trade policy, analyzing “America First” narrative construction strategies towards China and the concrete implementation of Trump’s China trade policy. Lastly, the study assesses the implications of Trump’s China trade policy on China, the U.S., and bilateral relations.

2. Formation And Characteristics Of The “America First” Populist Narrative

2.1. Theoretical Framework On Populism

In the contemporary political landscape, populism is a vague concept that many scholars and experts have attempted to define in different ways. In terms of language, scholars represented by Muddle and Kaltwasser believed that populism is a “thin-centered ideology” that pits a morally virtuous people against a corrupt and self-interested elite, looking at what populists say. Populism is a language of “Us” versus “Them”. In terms of actions, scholars represented by Weyland considered that populism is a particular kind of political strategy based on personalized and plebiscitary leadership, focusing on what populist leaders do. Power is invested in the leader and support is for the person rather than the party or movement [1].

In general, populist discourse often employs anti-elitist rhetoric to challenge established power structures and restore power to the masses. Populists typically use simple, direct language and emotional appeals to connect with their audience and to build a sense of shared identity among their followers. Populism can take different forms, ranging from left-wing to right-wing. Left-wing populism tends to focus on economic inequality and social justice, while right-wing populism often emphasizes national sovereignty, cultural identity, and opposition to immigration and globalization. For example, the former leader of the UK’s Labour Party Jeremy Corbyn is associated with left-wing populism. While Donald Trump, having served as the 45th President of the United States from January 2017 to January 2021, can be classified as a right-wing populist.

Donald Trump’s policy discourse during his presidency was marked by several elements that are characteristic of populism. Firstly, populists often frame political discourse in terms of a struggle between the “people” and various perceived threats or enemies, such as elites, immigrants, or international institutions. Trump frequently employs this tactic, depicting himself as a defender of the American people against perceived external threats and internal adversaries. For example, he often positioned himself as a champion of the “forgotten” or “ignored” working-class Americans, addressing their grievances and promising to prioritize their interests over those of the political establishment or elite.

Additionally, Trump’s frequent use of social media platforms like Twitter allows him to communicate directly with the public. This approach not only amplifies his message but also gives his supporters the impression of having a direct line to their leader, fostering a sense of personal connection and loyalty. What’s more, his use of emotive language was designed to resonate with the feelings and frustrations of his base, often tapping into cultural and economic anxieties.

Furthermore, Trump’s policies often prioritize the interests of the nation-state, particularly in areas such as trade, immigration, and national security. His policies and rhetoric emphasized national pride and sovereignty, often advocating for policies that prioritized American interests over international cooperation.

2.2. Interpretation Of “America First”

The “America First” slogan has its historical roots, associated with non-interventionist foreign policy. Back to the time when the Second World War was about to break out, the America First Committee (AFC) once opposed the idea of the USA being involved in the war. Nevertheless, the America First stance was challenged after the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941, leading to a shift in U.S. policy towards active involvement in World War II.

However, the phrase “America First” was later revived and recontextualized by Donald Trump during his presidential campaign and subsequent presidency. The international arena was perceived by Trump’s populist security imagination as a zero-sum game where the US had to compete with all other players to avoid loss and ensure its existence and prosperity. In a competitive environment, the Trump administration believes that the primary goal must be to maximize power and influence and to put America ahead of others. As Trump declared before the United Nations General Assembly in 2017: “As President of the United States, I will always put America first, just like you, as the leaders of your countries, will always, and should always, put your countries first” [2].

For Trump, to make the United States great again, it must adopt an America-first policy that 1) reformed trade policy to lower the trade deficit; 2) curtailed illegal immigration because immigrants lowered wages, siphoned off public resources, and were a security risk; 3) reduced our commitments to international institutions where members did not pay their fair share and/or ruled against U.S. interests; 4) stopped spending trillions of dollars on projects that benefited other nations but not the United States.

2.2.1. Economic Protectionism

The “America First” slogan embodies a protectionist economic policy. Domestically, Trump promised to protect domestic industries, jobs, and markets through measures including tax cuts for corporations and individuals, deregulation in several industries such as environmental deregulations, and encouraging businesses to bring manufacturing back to the U.S. Externally, Trump pledged to renegotiate NAFTA, pull the United States out of the TPP negotiations, and threatened massive tariffs against China and other countries if they did not reform their trade policies.

2.2.2. Anti-globalism

The America First doctrine promotes a more unilateral approach in international relations, suggesting that multilateral institutions and agreements often do not serve America’s best interests. This led to tensions with long-standing alliances like NATO, where he urged European members to increase their defense spending. Trump’s administration also withdrew from several international agreements and organizations, including the Paris Climate Accord and the World Health Organization, citing unfair burdens on the U.S. and a need to prioritize national sovereignty over global commitments.

2.2.3. Anti-immigration

According to Trump’s comments, immigration would contaminate American politics. It must therefore “control our borders.” Trump’s administration pushed for stricter immigration policies, including the construction of a wall along the U.S.– Mexico border, the implementation of travel bans from certain Muslim-majority countries, and efforts to end programs like Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals (DACA), arguing that such measures are necessary to protect American jobs and national security.

2.2.4. Non-interference

As he observed, “the key is to recognize that the post-World War II period of multilateralism is over and that continuing to act is harming the United States’ interests in multiple ways.” The America First policy advocates for cutting back on foreign aid and reducing the U.S. military’s role in overseas conflicts, to focus resources domestically and avoid costly wars that do not directly benefit American security.

3. Practice Of Populism In Trump’s China Trade Policy

3.1. “America First” Narrative Construction Strategies Towards China

With the deepening of economic globalization, anti-globalization undercurrents have also been surging, and populist movements have increased significantly. In recent years, public opinion in the United States has also been developing towards anti-globalization and trade protectionism, and many

people have expressed dissatisfaction with globalization and Sino-US trade. In the political and economic background of Western public opinion and voters turning to populism, Trump came to power under the banner of “Make America Great Again” and “America First”, which is to borrow the xenophobic “Americanism” shown by populism.

Trump’s trade narrative and subsequent actions presented his policies in populist terms as a conflict between two antagonistic groups: the “elites” and “ordinary people”. Domestically, “people” refers to industrial workers, the “middle class”, small business owners, or more generally American “taxpayers”. The “elite” includes his political opponents, politicians in general, previous White House administrations, wealthy people, and Wall Street funders. On the international front, “Trump’s populist language on international trade relations seeks to instrumentalize dissatisfaction with economic globalization. He presents globalization, part of which has involved the liberalization of international trade and investment flows, as a project designed and supervised by international ‘elites’ that marginalizes both nation-states and ‘ordinary people’ [3].” In both conflicts, he portrayed himself as being on the side of the “ordinary people”. Only an antiestablishment leader who is not ashamed to put “America first”, can promote the “authentic” needs of “the people”, defend against external Others and “take back control” over their economic destiny in a competitive global market.

Among these external threats, China has become a major one in particular amid the differential economic growth rate between the United States and China. According to Trump, Beijing has been able to outmaneuver Washington in important economic areas over the past several years due to China’s dishonest practices, which include the country’s alleged theft of American trade secrets. Moreover, China has been accused of manipulating currencies to make its exports more competitive by depreciating the value of the Renminbi relative to the US dollar. The accusations by Trump also include forced technology transfers and unfair subsidies to Chinese companies. The narrative portrayed China as an economic adversary exploiting the openness of global markets at the expense of American jobs and industries. In the era of expanding global populism, a populist leader’s ability to persuade voters that protecting the interests of the state and its residents is the main goal of his foreign policy is what determines a populist government’s longevity and popularity. Therefore, Trump can convince his audience about the necessity of taking his recommended extraordinary measures to contain what he believes to be existential threats to the U.S. economy.

Through this antagonism, the concept of national security connects with audiences and forms an important part of the US President’s security-centric rhetoric. In the words of Trump: “Our country is in serious trouble. We don’t have victories anymore”; “We have lost millions and millions of jobs to China and other countries”. “We’re in the middle of a jobs crisis, a border crisis and a terrorism crisis like never before”. “We’re like a third-world country... The idea of American Greatness, of our country as the leader of the free and unfree world, has vanished”. “Our country, in a certain sense, is disappearing”. “The American dream is dead”. Through existential crisis narratives, post-truth rhetoric, humiliation discourse, and conspiracy theories, Trump not only constructed an alternative political reality within the ideology of his populist discourse of security and threat, but he also channeled emotions such as hope, fear, nostalgia, and desire, all of which were encapsulated in his campaign slogan, “America First.” [4]

In conclusion, the portrayal of both internal and external Others as equally existential threats to the United States impacted foreign policy decisions and mobilized voters through effective persuasion. A shared affective space between Trump and his supporters was created by populist appeals to resentment, fear, and anxiety. This space served as a source of ontological reassurance and as legitimation for America First measures from trade protectionism and a Jacksonian foreign policy [5].

3.2. Trump’s China Trade Policy

President Donald Trump’s China trade policy was marked by a confrontational “America First” approach aimed at addressing the trade imbalance between the two countries, protecting American jobs, and challenging what the Trump administration viewed as unfair trade practices by China. Key

aspects of his policy include the Sino-U.S. trade war, technology competition, and economic decoupling.

Firstly, among Trump's trade sanctions against China, one of the most visible aspects was the initiation of a trade war with China, which involved imposing tariffs on hundreds of billions of dollars worth of Chinese imports. In August 2017, Trump directed the U.S. Trade Representative (USTR) to investigate China's practices under Section 301 of the Trade Act of 1974, alleging forced technology transfer, intellectual property theft, and discriminatory licensing practices. The investigation resulted in the justification for the imposition of tariffs. Starting in 2018, Trump initiated a series of tariff hikes on Chinese imports. This led to a trade war between the two nations. Throughout 2018 and 2019, both countries continued to escalate the dispute and there were several rounds of negotiations between U.S. and Chinese officials. In January 2020, a partial trade agreement, known as the Phase One Trade Agreement, was signed. It included a commitment by China to purchase additional U.S. agricultural products and a reduction in some tariffs, in exchange for the U.S. agreeing to halve the tariffs on a portion of the Chinese goods it had targeted. However, many of the thornier issues were left unresolved for future negotiations.

Moreover, Trump's administration also sought to curb China's technological rise, particularly in areas deemed strategic such as 5G networks and artificial intelligence. This led to actions like restricting Chinese companies like Huawei and ZTE from accessing American technology and markets, and urging allies to follow suit. Moreover, the Trump administration attempted to ban or force the sale of popular Chinese-owned apps TikTok and WeChat in the U.S., reflecting concerns over data privacy and potential influence operations.

Furthermore, there was a push for reducing economic dependence on China, encouraging American businesses to diversify supply chains and relocate them back to the U.S. or other countries, to mitigate perceived risks to national security and economic resilience. Firms may diversify their supplier base to reduce reliance on a single country, especially in critical industries. American companies were encouraged to bring production back home or relocate to other countries, a process known as reshoring or near-shoring, to mitigate risks associated with depending on Chinese manufacturing.

4. Impacts of Trump's China Trade Policy

4.1. Impacts On China

On the negative side, the tariffs imposed by the Trump administration led to a slowdown in China's export sector, one of the main engines of its economic growth. This resulted in reduced orders for Chinese manufacturers, particularly in sectors heavily targeted by tariffs, such as electronics, machinery, and textiles. What's more, companies have to reevaluate their reliance on China for manufacturing and sourcing materials. This has a certain impact on China's manufacturing industry in the process of economic transformation, with some businesses relocating to other Asian countries like Vietnam, Thailand, and India, or returning production to the U.S. In the long term, this could reduce China's dominance in global manufacturing but may also increase the complexity and costs of international trade.

On the positive side, the restrictions on technology transfers and access to advanced technologies from the U.S. pushed China to accelerate its efforts in developing homegrown technologies, including semiconductors, software, and advanced manufacturing equipment. This has led to increased investment in research and development and the nurturing of domestic champions in strategic sectors. These aim to make the Chinese economy less vulnerable to external shocks and enhance self-reliance. Additionally, the Sino-US trade war intensified China's diplomatic efforts to present itself as a defender of globalization and multilateralism. It sought to strengthen partnerships within the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative and enhance its role in international organizations, positioning itself as an alternative economic partner to the U.S.

4.2. Impacts On The U.S.

Trump's China trade policy had a range of impacts on the U.S. economy and businesses, with both positive and negative consequences. In terms of farmers and the agricultural sector, China's retaliatory tariffs significantly impacted U.S. agricultural exports. Some scholars estimate that retaliation led to significant US agricultural export losses of \$13.5 to \$18.7 billion on an annualized basis [6]. Farmers faced reduced demand and lower prices, prompting the U.S. government to provide financial aid to mitigate the losses. The Phase One Trade Deal partially addressed this issue with China committing to increased agricultural purchases, but the long-term effects on market share and remain uncertain. In terms of the manufacturing sector, while the policy aimed to revive manufacturing, its impact was mixed. Some industries benefited from protectionist measures, but others struggled with higher input costs and disrupted supply chains. The overall effect on job creation and retention in manufacturing is debated with some studies suggesting net job losses due to the tariffs.

Furthermore, the United States is one of the important countries for Chinese enterprises to invest in, and Trump's restrictions on Chinese enterprises will affect Chinese foreign-invested enterprises. Chinese companies, worried about the costs of the Trump administration's tough stance on Chinese companies, will gradually abandon the United States as their main investor. The trade war created an atmosphere of uncertainty for businesses planning investments and expansions, potentially dampening economic growth.

During the Sino-US trade war, the U.S. found itself navigating a more complex international landscape, with allies and partners caught between the two superpowers. The America First strategy also tends to lessen American economic clout abroad, which has traditionally been a source of American global dominance. The United States' global might is determined by more than just the total amount of its economic output. The fact that American businesses and capital are so widely dispersed throughout the globe, as well as the lure of access to American markets, contribute to the United States' strength. Other nations would probably retaliate in kind if the US restricted access to its markets for foreign investment, or even just hinted about doing so [7].

4.3. Impacts On Sino-US Relations

Firstly, the tariffs imposed by the U.S. on Chinese imports led to a significant decrease in trade between the two countries. This resulted in economic losses for both countries and volatility in the stock market. Therefore, it accelerated efforts by the U.S. and China to reduce their economic interdependence, as it strained relations between the two powers and prompted them to reassess their economic and strategic partnerships.

In addition, the trade conflict escalated tensions between the U.S. and China beyond just economics, seeping into areas like technology, security, and diplomacy. It has set a more confrontational tone for the bilateral relationship, which could have lasting implications for cooperation on issues like climate change, global health, and regional security. Issues such as human rights, cybersecurity, and territorial disputes became more contentious, contributing to a deterioration in overall bilateral ties. This competition in non-traditional security fields will seriously challenge and blow the security relations between China and the United States, which will have a great impact on Sino-US trade and global security. Repairing this relationship will likely be a significant challenge for future administrations.

Until now, the trade war had not been fully resolved, and tensions remained over issues such as technology competition, investment restrictions, and market access. The future trajectory of the Sino-U.S. economic relationship will depend on the outcomes of ongoing negotiations and the broader geopolitical context.

It is important to note that fixing the damaged Sino-U.S. relations will require sustained effort and compromise from both sides. The solution will likely involve a combination of economic measures, diplomatic engagement, and international cooperation. For example, both countries should re-

establish regular dialogue between senior officials to address outstanding issues and find common ground. The multilateral trading system and work within the framework of the WTO could also resolve disputes. These measures would help to maintain global economic stability and promote free trade.

5. Conclusion

The “America First” narrative established an enmity-centric framing device to legitimate US foreign policy choices and the United States’ role in the world. While it positioned itself as a defender of American interests against perceived Chinese economic aggression, the policy’s consequences are multifaceted. Domestically, it rallied support among segments of the population concerned with job security and economic decline. Internationally, it strained alliances and questioned the efficacy of multilateral institutions.

Despite its short-term appeal and efforts to revitalize certain domestic sectors, Trump’s America First trade policy to China has had an impact on the world economy and international relations. For China, while Trump’s China trade policy posed significant challenges to China’s economy, it also spurred China to accelerate its internal reforms, seek new trade partnerships, and advance its technological capabilities, further solidifying its position as a strategic competitor to the U.S. in the global economic arena. For the United States, the trade policy’s long-term implications for the U.S. economy, international trade relations, and the balance of power in the global economic order are still unfolding and subject to ongoing policy decisions. More importantly, the trade policy had a profound impact on Sino-U.S. relations, introducing a new level of economic and political tension between the world’s two largest economies. The path forward necessitates diplomatic engagement, a potential recalibration of trade strategies, and a reevaluation of the role of populism in shaping international economic relations.

The study’s primary limitation lies in its focus on the Trump administration’s tenure, which may not fully encapsulate the evolving nature of U.S.-China trade relations over time. Additionally, the study’s reliance on available data might not fully represent the complexity of economic impacts, and the causal linkages drawn could be subject to ongoing academic debate. As for future research, there is a need to examine the enduring effects of “America First” policies on international trade systems and to explore comparative analyses of different nations’ trade strategies. Investigating the domestic repercussions of trade policies, the influence of technological changes on trade dynamics, and the role of post-Trump administrations in shaping trade narratives will also be crucial. Moreover, understanding the influence of multilateral institutions in a shifting global trade landscape and developing inclusive trade policies that address both national and global interests present promising avenues for further scholarly inquiry.

References

- [1] Magcamit, Michael Intal. “EXPLAINING THE THREE-WAY LINKAGE BETWEEN POPULISM, SECURITIZATION, AND REALIST FOREIGN POLICIES: President Donald Trump and the Pursuit of “America First” Doctrine.” *World Affairs* 180.3(2017).
- [2] Edwards, Jason A. “Make America Great Again: Donald Trump and Redefining the U.S. Role in the World.” *Communication Quarterly* 66.2(2018):176-195.
- [3] Gruszczynski, Lukasz, and J. Lawrence. “Trump, International Trade and Populism.” (2019).
- [4] Wojczewski, Thorsten. “Trump, Populism, and American Foreign Policy.” *Foreign Policy Analysis* (2019).
- [5] Loefflmann, Georg. ““Enemies of the people’: Donald Trump and the security imaginary of America First.” (2021).
- [6] Grant, Jason H.Arita, ShawnEmlinger, CharlotteJohansson, RobertXie, Chaoping. “Agricultural exports and retaliatory trade actions: An empirical assessment of the 2018/2019 trade conflict.” *Applied Economic Perspectives and Policy* 43.2(2021).
- [7] Chivvis, Christopher S., and Ethan Kapstein. “US Strategy and Economic Statecraft: Understanding the Tradeoffs.” (2022).