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Trump, Tariffs, and International Trade Politics

Professor Ken Shadlen explores the potential resurgence of Donald Trump's tariff-driven trade policies, their political and economic implications, and how they reflect a normalisation of previously controversial approaches to international trade.

The return of Donald Trump to the White House is expected to be accompanied by substantial increases in US tariffs, across the board and selectively on particular countries and products.

During the first Trump presidency (2017-2021), I wrote a pair of blog posts discussing political aspects of US trade policy. In this [2018 piece](#) I analysed Trump's tariffs on steel and aluminium in the context of WTO rules, and I considered what these measures implied for the international trade regime.

The following year, in 2019, when Trump threatened to impose tariffs on Mexico if the latter country did not enact reforms to its immigration control policies, I [discussed](#) what the linkage between tariffs and immigration policy means for how we think about "trade," and also what Trump's threats implied for countries, like Mexico, that had signed bilateral trade agreements with the USA.

Now, with Trump's return, and the use of tariffs (threatened or imposed) for economic and political leverage likely to be even more prominent than during the first Trump presidency, it's worth revisiting some of these issues. One thing that's striking, and that perhaps suggests that the world created by Trump's earlier trade policy has become the new status quo, that what seemed aberrant at the time now appears entirely normal, is how the current threats are made (and [discussed in the media](#)) with scarcely any reference at all to international rules, global (e.g. WTO) or regional and bilateral (e.g. NAFTA/USMCA).

The views expressed in this post are those of the author and in no way reflect those of the International Development LSE blog or the London School of Economics and Political Science.

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About the author



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Ken Shadlen is Professor of Development Studies in the Department of International Development at LSE. Ken works on the comparative and international political economy of development, with a focus on understanding variation in national policy responses to changing global rules. In recent years Ken's research has focused largely on the global and cross-national politics of intellectual property (IP). He is interested in the implications that the new global IP regime presents for late development, and the various ways that international norms for IP affect national practices.

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