Expert Perspectives on Trump's Tariff Negotiations

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Editor's Introduction

This section introduces a new format in Negotiation and Conflict Management Research titled Expert Perspectives. It features concise contributions from scholars in our academic community, each offering a distinct lens on a recent negotiation event. The aim is to enrich readers' understanding and stimulate scholarly debate by presenting analyses that bridge research, policy, and practice.

Negotiation is a dynamic field in which real-world developments unfold rapidly, while academic research cycles often take years to generate robust insights. Expert Perspectives is designed to bridge this gap by curating analyses of recent events from leading scholars and sharing them with readers in near real time. Each contribution is grounded in theory, data, and disciplinary expertise, yet written in a concise and accessible style that offers a robust understanding of complex issues.

Our inaugural edition focuses on President Trump's second-term "Liberation Day" tariff campaign, a turning point in global trade negotiations. It marked a shift from incremental, rules-based dispute settlement toward highly visible, power-driven bargaining, challenging multilateral institutions and reshaping expectations of how major economies engage with one another.

For this edition, we invited a group of negotiation experts to examine the campaign from different angles. Horacio Falcão and Rodrigo Gouveia analyze the negotiation logic behind

Trump's hard-bargaining strategy, while Chin-Chung Chao in The Art of the Tariff Deal explores the process mechanisms of preparation, framing, and coercive diplomacy. Peter Kesting in When Does Toughness Become Unethical? addresses the ethical boundaries of Trump's tactics, asking when hard bargaining turns into manipulation. Daniel Druckman, Remigiusz Smolinski, and Lynn Wagner then assess how the European Union, China, Canada, and Mexico responded under pressure. Qi Wang Schlupp provides a close-up on the United States–China case through a phased competitive–integrative model, and Giovanna Maria Dora Dore together with Siniša Vuković reflect on the broader systemic implications of the U.S. shift from rules-based multilateralism to power-based bargaining.

Together, these contributions highlight the value of this format: combining the academic expertise expected of NCMR with the immediacy and plurality needed to understand complex negotiations in real time, and showcasing the collective knowledge of our community.

Trump's Tariffs and the Negotiation Pitfalls of Fighting Power with Power

By Horacio Falcão & Rodrigo Gouveia

On his so-called Liberation Day (April 2, 2025), President Donald Trump stunned the world by launching a wave of bilateral trade renegotiations with nearly every major trading partner. His administration imposed tight deadlines and threatened steep tariffs, marking a dramatic departure from traditional multilateral trade diplomacy (Rocha et al., 2025). Besides its significant political and economic ramifications, this negotiation campaign reveals a calculated effort to reshape U.S. relationships and capture enormous value using Trump's preferred strategy: hard bargaining.

Most countries, including long-time U.S. allies, were caught off guard. Scrambling to respond, many operated in reaction mode and negotiated suboptimally. In this article, we analyze the negotiation logic behind Trump's approach and offer guidance on how to effectively manage it.

Trump's Algorithm for Hard Bargaining

Trump has consistently favoured a hard bargaining approach, grounded in power dynamics (Fisher et al., 2011; Kogan, 2019). His strategy can be summarized in the following algorithm:

1. **Prioritize Power Over Principles:** Negotiations can be won by having a large power superiority over your counterparties, more so than rights, fairness, or shared values.
2. **Accumulate Power:** Use every available channel to boost your relative power. Reject norms and common procedures in favor of unilaterally advantageous processes, such as imposing deadlines on the counterparties.

3. **Assert Power:** Use your power advantage to secure gains by:
   - Issuing credible threats (BATNA).
   - Making extreme demands (anchoring high).
   - Displaying superiority and arrogance to instill fear and signal dominance.
   - Negotiating everything.
   - Demanding major concessions while offering little or nothing in return.
4. **Punish Resistance:** Deter opposition by:
   - Escalating pressure quickly (part of the "mad dog" strategy).
   - Publicly shaming or attacking those who resist.
   - Framing the other side as exploitative or dishonest to justify your aggressive behavior.
   - Offering reconciliation only after the counterpart has conceded.
5. **Control the Narrative:**
   - If successful, claim victory and publicly praise the other side to help them save face and elevate your own reputation.
   - If not, deny responsibility, shift blame to the counterpart for the failed deal, and avoid calling attention to your failure.

Does Hard Bargaining Work?

The short answer is that it can work really well, but only for negotiators with large power advantages (e.g., the President of the United States). Moreover, Trump has honed these tactics over decades. However, the very nature of power is volatile. Even a powerful actor like the U.S. risks long-term backlash, reputational damage, or value destruction if counterparties resist, retaliate, or quietly realign with other players. Trump appears willing to take these risks, perhaps prioritizing short-term wins, political optics, or believing that his power advantage will shield him from these risks and deliver significantly more wins than losses.

Trump's hard bargaining approach has a personal twist: once his counterparties acknowledge his power superiority, he opens up to or invites them into a value creation exercise to get even more value at the end. This twist opens possibilities for his counterparties to also get value in return.

Breaking Down Trump's Tariff Hard Bargaining Moves

The Liberation Day tariff negotiations showcase a classic hard bargaining strategy. Still, some of Trump's power moves or choices may seem counterintuitive.

From Multilateralism to Bilateralism

Trump's preference for bilateral negotiations stems from a simple logic: the U.S. has a power advantage in one-on-one negotiations due to its unmatched economic and military strength. In multiparty negotiations, this advantage is diluted by rules, procedures, and opposing coalitions. By reverting to bilateral formats, Trump increases his power advantage.

Although countries could resist this imposed structure by forming counter-coalitions or threatening dramatic retaliation, such as dumping U.S. Treasury bonds (Kageyama, 2025), the risk of such moves is enormous. These tactics risk global financial chaos and prompt the U.S. to also

escalate beyond trade retaliations. For example, Japan swiftly ruled out using its significant U.S. bond holdings as leverage (Kihara, 2025), signaling that such countermeasures were too costly politically and economically (Egan, 2025). Similarly, when the EU sought to strengthen its tariff negotiation position against the U.S. by negotiating first with China, it declared that it had to be careful on how it aligned with China to avoid antagonizing the U.S. too much (McNeil & Moritsugu, 2025). Figuring out that line of proper or proportionate retaliation against a more powerful party without leading to escalation is a delicate and difficult exercise.

Trump is navigating a calculated balance: pushing for tariffs high enough to pressure concessions but not so high that retaliation becomes more attractive than conceding. The U.S.'s structural advantages, including dollar dominance, market size, military strength, regulatory control, and global institutional influence, create dozens of retaliation levers that are difficult to counter without an unprecedented international coordination effort.

Tight Deadlines, Simultaneous Negotiations, and Worsening Alternatives

Trump's imposition of tight deadlines, parallel negotiation processes, and unilaterally setting high tariffs as the new status quo are all individually risky moves. For one, simultaneous negotiations with dozens of countries create an enormous operational challenge for the U.S. and facilitate the rise of opposing coalitions.

However, these three moves compound to create a unique sense of urgency. The tight deadlines and setting high tariffs as the new status quo force countries to act and make painful concessions to strike a deal quickly – before forming coalitions or understanding what deals their competitors might be getting. For export-dependent countries, delays could mean losing U.S. market share, which can be hard to regain.

Meanwhile, the choice for parallel negotiations with the U.S. at the center, if well managed, helps the U.S. learn more information, decide to close the best deals first, thus creating positive precedents to increase leverage against more reluctant countries, and having enough successful stories to promote in the Media.

The ASEAN Case: Divide, Conquer, and Cascade

ASEAN illustrates how Trump's tactics fragmented regional unity. On April 13, Malaysian PM Anwar Ibrahim declared ASEAN would respond to tariffs as a bloc. But by then, unity had already crumbled. Vietnam pre-emptively cut tariffs and opened its market to U.S. firms, followed by Cambodia later on the same day. Indonesia and Thailand quickly followed with similar moves, and even Malaysia eventually negotiated a carve-out for its semiconductor sector (Jones, 2025).

By dealing individually with ASEAN states, imposing tight deadlines, and establishing high tariffs as the new status quo, Trump induced a race to the bottom. Once one country broke ranks, the rest of these export-oriented economies were compelled to follow or risk losing the significantly large U.S. market for their exports.

Why Use Hard Bargaining Tactics Even Against Allies?

U.S. allies have been particularly puzzled by Trump's hard bargaining tactics and the risk they pose to mutual trust. This reaction overlooks that hard bargainers prioritize power over trust and favor relationships grounded in hierarchy or loyalty. While more confrontational or low in trust,

such relationships can still be mutually beneficial, so long as the underlying power imbalance remains stable.

Allied leaders often criticize Trump's overt use of power and personal attacks, yet rarely acknowledge how they openly supported Biden, thus undermining Trump during the last U.S. elections. Nor do they admit to the many disingenuous trade practices they themselves have employed, including both tariff and non-tariff barriers often used as thinly veiled power plays.

The U.S. has frequently sidestepped the WTO's "national treatment" principles to shield domestic industries, citing justifications such as health, national security, patents, or consumer safety. Yet its trade partners have engaged in similar practices. France, for example, has repeatedly invoked cultural preservation to restrict imports of U.S. films and TV shows (Walkey, 2016), fast food, and beef (Taylor et al., 2003). The EU has also maintained a 10% tariff on U.S. automobiles for 46 years, compared to the U.S.'s 2.5% tariff on EU cars. In January 2025, BMW's CEO publicly urged the EU to lower its auto tariff to 2.5% to avoid provoking a U.S. backlash, but the plea was ignored (Reuters, 2025a).

From Trump's perspective, the U.S. has been unduly generous for decades (Badshah et al., 2025), while its allies have benefited disproportionately and undermined U.S. interests through covert power plays. He believes that the U.S. holds significant geopolitical and economic leverage over its allies. In this context, adopting hard bargaining tactics is, in his view, not only coherent strategically, but also justified and necessary to recalibrate a long-standing imbalance.

Why Focus on Tariffs?

As an adept dealmaker, Trump sees negotiations as political tools, and tariffs not only as protectionism but also as a potential value in themselves (Itskhoki & Mukhin, 2025a, 2025b). Moreover, Trump has been leveraging tariffs as a high-stakes negotiation opening gambit to advance multiple goals at once: generating revenue, stimulating exports, shrinking its trade deficit, restoring U.S. manufacturing, repatriating jobs (Hyatt, 2025), obtaining voter support, pursuing geopolitical goals, and crafting a legacy of strength.

Besides, the global consensual narrative around tariffs is that low to no tariffs benefit everyone, and that one should not raise tariffs to avoid retaliation. Yet most countries use some form of tariffs to protect their markets, but want others to lower theirs in a version of the tragedy of the commons. One could argue that the U.S. has historical reasons to be wary of raising tariffs. In 1930, the U.S. Smoot-Hawley Tariff Act raised thousands of tariffs, prompting its trading partners to retaliate and help push the U.S. into the Great Depression (The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2025). However, the U.S. of today is the global hegemon and thus retaliations, as we have seen so far, are much less likely to be coordinated or severe.

Also, many argue that higher U.S. tariffs will mean that foreign money will avoid the U.S. in retaliation or because the dollar or imported parts or materials would become too expensive, and thus U.S. exports would suffer (Hyatt, 2025). But Trump has been negotiating tariffs in a bundle with repatriation of companies, investments, and pledges for U.S. products (Cerullo, 2025). Even though value may have been destroyed at a global level, the U.S. used its leverage to pursue the capture of more absolute value. Whether that will materialize remains to be seen.

Finally, tariffs as the epicentre of renegotiating U.S. international relations seems to be a relatively safe framing as tariffs are commercially oriented and inherently easier to manage than geopolitically sensitive matters. Tariffs are more conducive to Trump's preferred hard bargaining strategy as they carry a lower risk of military or diplomatic escalation.

What Are Other Countries Getting Wrong?

Many countries negotiating with Trump attempt to combat power with power and, in doing so, fall into at least one of four pitfalls (Gouveia & Falcão, 2025).

The first pitfall is refusing to acknowledge the realities of power. Some negotiators act as if they can ignore the U.S.'s large bargaining leverage and present themselves as equals. But Trump will not negotiate on equal terms when he holds a clear power advantage. This approach only provokes him to press his leverage until it becomes impossible to ignore.

The second pitfall is making resistance public, or worse, attacking or embarrassing Trump publicly. Such actions tarnish Trump's image of power and trigger him to double down, using the situation as an example to deter others.

The third pitfall is focusing negotiation preparation on overcoming the U.S. power gap. Power cannot be conjured overnight, and the U.S. enjoys a tremendous advantage. Preparing in this manner leads negotiators toward a power showdown with Trump.

The final pitfall is judging the value of the deal by Trump's anchor (his extreme initial demand). That anchor is neither his true goal nor the most valuable outcome for either party. Negotiating primarily to resist the anchor distorts priorities and sets the stage for poor outcomes.

Better Strategies: "Fighting Fire with Water"

To counter hard bargaining from a position of power disadvantage, you should weaken its appeal and attract the hard bargainer into value creation (Gouveia-Oliveira & Falcão, 2025). A good starting point is to signal your intent to negotiate collaboratively in advance (Falcão & Wiegelmann, 2025), and to acknowledge that their power advantage is a relevant, even if only one, variable in the negotiation. From there, shift the focus toward maximizing value by working to satisfy both your interests and theirs.

While doing so, avoid triggering a power struggle. Be honest, do not pretend to be the self-righteous arbiter of truth or fairness, and resist the temptation to wield power through threats, tricks, lies, or disingenuous claims of never being protectionist (Falcão, 2012). By following this approach, the hard bargainer no longer feels compelled to prove their power in order to claim value (splitting the pie) and instead becomes open to engaging also in value creation (enlarging the pie).

In this way, Trump will not view you as a stubborn negotiator to be bent but as a reasonable, non-threatening partner with whom he can work to maximize the overall value of the deal. As more value is created and the potential agreement improves for both sides, even if not equally to reflect power differences, Trump has less incentive to jeopardize the deal by imposing unilateral tariffs.

A Mini Case Study: EU–U.S. Tariff Negotiations under Trump

When confronted with Trump's tariff demands and concerns over trade imbalances and unfair practices, the EU reacted defiantly. Seeking to bolster its negotiating power, it turned to China to explore alternative trade deals, ironically adopting the same trade-imbalance rationale it had previously dismissed when used by the U.S. However, these talks ended in a diplomatic setback, with China offering no significant concessions beyond a climate agreement that largely benefits Chinese exports (McNeil & Moritsugu, 2025). Ultimately, the EU publicly prepared to fight the

U.S. and publicly ended up demonstrating its lack of BATNA.

In the end, it was forced to close the negotiation by conceding on all major points: opening its markets to the U.S., accepting 15% tariffs on most EU exports to the U.S., pledging $600 billion in investment, and agreeing to purchase $750 billion in U.S. energy at premium prices. EU Commission President Ursula von der Leyen declared this a win, highlighting that the 15% tariff was better than Trump's original ask of 30% (Gray & Shalal, 2025). Unfortunately, this negotiation shows the EU committing all four negotiation mistakes highlighted above: they failed to acknowledge the U.S. power, publicly defied and threatened Trump, focused their negotiation preparation on raising their power by attempting to align with China, and anchored their success on Trump's first offer.

Could the EU have negotiated a better outcome? Possibly. Trump's initial claim, that the EU blocked several U.S. products from its markets, was factually accurate. A more pragmatic approach would have been for the EU to signal an early intent to negotiate collaboratively by acknowledging the validity of his argument early on, avoid the unnecessary power posturing and other dead-ends, and swiftly negotiate a correction based on the value and power the U.S. brought to the table. This move could have opened the door for a broader value-creating approach to preserve EU market access, avoid U.S. tariffs and EU commercial pledges, and closing an earlier deal would give Trump both a political win to leverage within the U.S. and a precedent to use in his tariff negotiations with other countries.

Conclusion

Trump's hard bargaining approach is far from the perfect strategy, but it works well for those with large leverage over their counterparties and low concern for long-term risks, either because they care less about long-term results or are confident in managing such risks in different ways (including maintaining a power advantage into the future).

After decades without seeing such overt power moves from the U.S., Trump launched Liberation Day, a hard-bargaining negotiation process that only someone as powerful as the President of the United States could pull off. His tariff strategy is not about fairness, collaboration, or process, but rather the use of superior power to shift global trade negotiations to the U.S.'s advantage.

Most world leaders have failed to appreciate the negotiation nuances of Trump's tariff negotiations. Many panicked and just gave in to the U.S. Others tried in vain to fight fire with fire as if they were U.S. equals in power. Others justified their actions by equating any collaboration with Trump as bending over, begging, or collaborating with the devil, which is ultimately a cop-out. World leaders have a responsibility to their country and its citizens to negotiate effectively, rather than prioritizing their own image.

Negotiating tariffs with Trump should involve a precise understanding of the roles of power, value, and fairness in negotiations. It involves acknowledging the U.S. power superiority without just giving in, but rather negotiating to make the deal valuable for both. Choosing to avoid public arguments or escalations of power (unlikely to work against the U.S. right now) and focus preparations towards finding value. By pursuing the right moves and avoiding high-risk ones, we believe that world leaders can negotiate better and craft superior deals.

The Art of the Tariff Deal: Donald Trump's Approach to Tariff Negotiations through Process Mechanisms

By Chin-Chung Chao

Donald Trump's use of tariffs as a central instrument of statecraft offers a crisp vantage point on negotiation as process rather than outcome. While prior presidents treated tariffs primarily as technical tools for trade adjustment, Trump consistently employed them as high-visibility bargaining levers directed at foreign counterparts and domestic audiences alike. In so doing, he made salient a set of process mechanisms that negotiation scholars have long examined: distributive versus integrative framing (Lewicki et al., 2020), anchoring and reference points (Tversky & Kahneman, 1974), BATNA management (Fisher et al., 2011), two-level games and audience costs (Putnam, 1988; Fearon, 1994), coercive diplomacy (George, 1991), deadline pressure and escalation (Pruitt & Kim, 2004), and strategic unpredictability (Schelling, 1960). Trump's practice makes these otherwise abstract concepts unusually visible.

This essay analyzes Trump's tariff statecraft through two linked stages of process: (1) preparation and framing, where problem definitions, reference points, and audience commitments are set; and (2) bargaining behavior, where threats, offers, deadlines, and signaling are deployed. Rather than judging the substantive desirability of particular trade outcomes, the analysis surfaces portable lessons about immediacy versus durability: the degree to which process choices generate quick concessions and tactical visibility, versus the extent to which they produce compliance that persists, trust that accumulates, and structures for future cooperation (Keohane, 1984; Sebenius, 1992). This essay situates Trump's tariff statecraft within a process lens, complementary to outcome-oriented analyses. Rather than assessing the normative desirability of specific trade outcomes, it foregrounds process choices: how negotiation mechanisms create immediate concessions versus longer-term compliance and trust. Immediacy reflects the quick gains, visibility, and tactical leverage of process tools; durability captures the persistence of agreements, the accumulation of trust, and structures that support future cooperation.

To make these mechanisms concrete, this analysis integrates illustrative episodes, including U.S.-China, EU, NAFTA/USMCA, Mexico migration, and NATO linkages directly into the narrative. A concise Tariff Playbook table summarizes intended effects, short-term payoffs, long-term costs, and boundary conditions. The essay concludes with implications for both scholars and practitioners, emphasizing a diagnostic framework for balancing immediacy and durability in negotiation strategy.

Negotiation Preparation and Framing

Trade as a Zero-Sum Contest

A consistent hallmark of Trump's rhetoric was the reduction of complex trade relationships to a zero-sum scoreboard: bilateral deficits signaled that "we are losing." As a distributive frame, zero-sum narratives are simple, sticky, and mobilizing; they highlight relative shares, invite toughness norms, and push negotiators toward claiming value rather than creating it (Lewicki et al., 2020). In the U.S.-China confrontation, for example, Trump repeatedly cited the large bilateral deficit as evidence of "cheating," translating a multifaceted interdependence (services trade,

investment, intellectual property, supply-chain complementarities) into a single metric of loss. The frame locked in a red line: deficit reduction first, everything else later.

Process implications follow. A zero-sum lens clarifies priorities and sharpens resolve, especially where domestic audiences reward combative stances (Fearon, 1994). Yet it also forecloses integrative trades. For instance, package deals that combine tariff relief with regulatory coordination, technology standards, or supply-chain risk-sharing (Sebenius, 1992). When negotiators start by defining success as "making the pie fair by changing the slice," they leave less room to make the pie bigger. In short: the frame was an asset for immediacy, a liability for durability. In other words, zero-sum frames may win battles quickly but undermine the capacity to build lasting agreements.

Reciprocity as an Anchor

Trump frequently anchored negotiations around the principle of reciprocity: "if they tax us 25%, we'll tax them 25%." Anchors matter because they shape the subsequent bargaining range (Tversky & Kahneman, 1974). In disputes with the European Union, calls for "equal tariffs" reframed technical schedules as moral imperatives, compressing feasible solutions toward parity.

Anchoring has a clear short-term benefit: it creates an easily communicable fairness narrative and signals clear benchmarks. However, it can crowd out creative or asymmetric solutions. Complex trade relationships often benefit from asymmetric exchanges - tariff reductions tied to mutual recognition of standards, regulatory alignment, or supply-chain flexibility. By prioritizing parity, the negotiation constrains integrative possibilities (Sebenius, 1992). The immediate payoff is public clarity; the long-term cost is reduced creative latitude.

Analytically, zero-sum framing and reciprocity anchoring together reveal a negotiation style that prioritizes visibility, symbolic parity, and domestic reward over long-term problem-solving. The repeated use of these frames signals a preference for tactical leverage rather than durable cooperation.

Emphasizing BATNA Strength and Overlooking Drift

Trump's message repeatedly emphasized America's strong Best Alternative to a Negotiated Agreement (BATNA): the world's largest consumer market, diversified suppliers, and the option to "walk away" (Fisher et al., 2011). Signaling a robust BATNA can deter adversaries and invite concessions. Yet BATNAs are not static; they "drift" as others retaliate, adapt, and rewire supply chains. Chinese counter-tariffs targeting U.S. agriculture raised domestic political costs, leading to substantial subsidies and eroding the credibility of "we can absorb the pain." As retaliation mounted, the U.S. BATNA became endogenous to the negotiation, degrading over time (Putnam, 1988). The process lesson is straightforward: manage BATNA drift by anticipating retaliation paths, insulating vulnerable constituencies, and pacing escalation to preserve long-run leverage.

Two-Level Signaling and Issue Linkage

Finally, Trump's framing functioned as a classic two-level game: signaling toughness to foreign negotiators while cultivating domestic audience commitments that limited subsequent flexibility (Putnam, 1988; Fearon, 1994). He also engaged in issue linkage, tying tariff relief to non-trade objectives, most visibly in pressuring NATO allies on defense spending and later in conditioning

tariff threats on Mexico's migration enforcement. Linkage can expand the bargaining space and raise the cost of noncompliance, but it also escalates distrust if partners interpret linkage as coercive bundling rather than cooperative problem-solving (Keohane, 1984). The result: greater immediate leverage paired with longer-run reputational friction, which can reduce the willingness of partners to invest in future joint regimes.

Bargaining Behavior: Coercive Diplomacy in Action

Threat-Offer Sequencing

In the bargaining phase, Trump's approach closely resembled coercive diplomacy: pair a threat with a conditional offer of relief to induce compliance (George, 1991). The pattern surfaced repeatedly - announce tariffs, then signal suspension or rollback if specific demands were met. During the NAFTA-to-USMCA transition, the administration threatened withdrawal, imposed steel and aluminum tariffs, and then used tariff relief and side-letters as sweeteners for agreement. Threat-offer sequencing creates urgency and can accelerate movement when the counterpart is vulnerable. But it also forces the game onto an escalation track: once a threat is issued, failing to act undermines credibility, and acting raises the stakes for both sides.

Deadlines, Escalation Ladders, and the Problem of Predictability

Trump's style leveraged deadlines and escalation ladders to compress decision time and induce brink concessions (Pruitt & Kim, 2004). The "next tranche of tariffs" became a metronome driving talks forward. However, the repeated use of deadline pressure can become predictable, teaching counterparts to wait out the cycle. In addition, as sanctions and counter-sanctions accumulate, domestic and international audiences update beliefs about the credibility of threats and the reversibility of offers (Tyler, 1990). The Mexico episode in 2019 illustrates both power and cost: surprise tariff threats linked to migration yielded swift, symbolic commitments from Mexico and a rapid de-escalation—but also raised doubts among businesses and allies about the stability of U.S. commitments going forward.

Strategic Unpredictability: Value and Limits

Trump's team frequently invoked unpredictability as leverage - Schelling's insight that some value attaches to appearing less than fully controllable (Schelling, 1960). In the short run, uncertainty disrupts opponent planning, raises risk premiums, and can induce concessions to "buy calm." Yet unpredictability is a wasting asset. Overuse yields credibility decay: partners discount promises, delay investments, and hedge with alternative suppliers. In the U.S.-China context, bursts of conciliatory rhetoric (e.g., praise at summits) alternated with new tariff announcements, encouraging Beijing to weight revealed patterns over stated intentions. The process trade-off is sharp: sparingly applied, unpredictability can catalyze movement; routinely applied, it depresses the very cooperation that sustains durable compliance.

Public Theater versus Private Channels

Trump paired public confrontation with private backchannels. Public dramas (tweets, press avowals of toughness, last-minute cliffhangers) played strongly to domestic audiences and shaped bargaining psychology. But public dramatization can trigger reactive devaluation: the tendency to discount concessions perceived as coming from an adversary or as tactical theater (Ross & Ward, 1995). When foreign negotiators infer that visible concessions will be spun domestically as "wins," they may withhold early compromises, aiming to trade them only at the brink. The result is a credibility gap between public and private signaling that reduces the efficiency of backchannel problem-solving.

The Tariff Playbook

Table 1 summarizes the core tools in Trump's tariff playbook. As a process summary, the table is not the centerpiece but a compact map of intended effects, short-run payoffs, long-run costs, and conditions for effectiveness.

Table 1 The Tariff Playbook in Process Terms

Tactic	Intended effect	Short-term payoff	Long-term cost	Conditions for effectiveness
Zero-sum framing	Mobilize domestic support; sharpen distributive focus	Clear messaging; audience rewards toughness	Blocks integrative options; narrows ZOPA	Works when political incentives favor visible toughness
Reciprocity anchoring	Simplify fairness claims; set salient benchmark	Narrows range toward U.S. terms	Crowds out creative, asymmetric trades	Effective when issues are symmetric and verifiable
BATNA emphasis	Project strength; deter delay	Signals resolve; deters walk-away	BATNA drift under retaliation; domestic blowback	Works if BATNA is resilient and insulated
Threat–offer sequencing	Create urgency; induce concessions	Accelerates movement	Forces escalation if unmet; resentment	Effective when counterpart is vulnerable and monitoring audiences are supportive
Deadlines & escalation	Compress decision time	Visible leverage; last-minute deals	Predictable brinkmanship; fatigue	Works when counterpart cannot absorb delay
Strategic unpredictability	Disrupt counterpart planning	Keeps adversaries off-balance	Credibility decay; investment hesitation	Effective when used sparingly and paired with reliable endgames
Public theater + private channel	Signal toughness while exploring compromise	Maintains dual tracks	Reactive devaluation; backchannel mistrust	Works if reputation allows separation of audiences

Two interpretive points are worth emphasizing. First, the tools are complementary when sequenced with care: for example, reciprocity anchoring can establish a salient benchmark, while selective unpredictability and time-bound threats generate urgency to meet it. Second, the tools are fragile when overused: repeated reliance on threats deadens their marginal effect; constant unpredictability hollows credibility; persistent zero-sum frames shrink the zone of possible agreement (ZOPA) and suppress creative trades. Interpretively, the playbook illustrates a process-first strategy emphasizing immediacy: headline-friendly concessions, visible parity, and tactical leverage. The trade-off is durability: compressed ZOPAs, reputational friction, and BATNA erosion.

Analytical Continuity: What the Choices Reveal

Taken together, these choices reveal a high-visibility, power-forward negotiation style prioritizing immediacy - headline-friendly concessions, visible parity claims, and demonstration effects. The strategy is internally coherent: a distributive frame primes domestic audiences; reciprocity anchors simplify benchmarks; BATNA emphasis and issue linkage expand perceived leverage; and coercive tactics drive timelines. Yet, as institutionalists would predict (Keohane, 1984), a style that marginalizes integrative problem-solving and routinized cooperation tends to underproduce durability. Partners hedge, retaliate, and seek alternatives; trust erodes; and the compliance tail of agreements shortens. The pattern is not unique to the Trump administration, but the intensity and publicness of the approach made the trade-offs unusually stark.

Comparisons across cases reinforce this. With the EU, reciprocity anchoring produced symbolic concessions but undercut deeper cooperation. With China, distributive framing locked both sides into cycles of escalation. In North America, coercive sequencing yielded the USMCA but strained trust. With Mexico, deadline pressure achieved symbolic migration commitments, but credibility costs lingered. In NATO, tariff linkage amplified friction in the security relationship. Across contexts, immediacy dominated durability.

Decision Framework: Immediacy or Durability

Practitioners need a simple diagnostic for when to lean into immediacy and when to protect durability:
1. **Assess counterpart vulnerability and time preference.** If the other side faces acute exposure (e.g., supply shocks, election cycles), deadline pressure and threat–offer sequences can unlock near-term movement (Pruitt & Kim, 2004). If vulnerabilities are diffuse or long-horizon, escalation may provoke learning and adaptation, degrading your leverage.
2. **Map BATNA drift channels.** Identify retaliation paths (by sector and constituency), potential subsidies needed to buffer allies at home, and time-to-rewire for supply chains. If drift is likely and hard to cushion, pace escalation and preserve option value (Fisher et al., 2011).
3. **Choose frames to match endgames.** If a one-off, visible concession is the goal (e.g., symbolic parity), reciprocity anchoring may suffice. If durable cooperation is required (e.g., standards, IP regimes), integrative framing and structured reciprocity (sequenced, verifiable steps) are essential (Sebenius, 1992).

4. **Meter unpredictability.** Use surprise once to unsettle and then transition to credible pathways (Schelling, 1960). The longer the process, the more value shifts to predictability that encourages investments in compliance.

5. **Separate audiences when possible.** Keep enough private space to test trades without performative incentives dominating. Overexposure of public theater risks reactive devaluation that lowers the marginal value of concessions (Ross & Ward, 1995).

Conclusion: Lessons for Negotiation Theory and Practice

Trump's use of tariffs as negotiation tools highlights the importance of analyzing negotiation as process. His playbook (zero-sum framing, reciprocity anchoring, unpredictability, escalation–de-escalation, and immediacy) offers a distinctive approach with both strengths and weaknesses.

For scholars, this case underscores the need to integrate process analysis into negotiation theory. Trump's approach illustrates how framing and leadership style can influence dynamics, complementing outcome- and structure-focused perspectives. His emphasis on immediacy raises questions about the trade-off between symbolic victories and durable agreements, contributing to debates in negotiation research (Sebenius & Green, 2020).

For practitioners, Trump's tariff playbook offers cautionary lessons. Unpredictability and escalation can yield short-term leverage, but at the cost of credibility and trust. Zero-sum framing may mobilize domestic support but can hinder integrative solutions. Reciprocity anchoring can simplify bargaining but risks oversimplifying complex interdependencies. Ultimately, negotiators must balance immediacy and durability, recognizing that quick wins may undermine long-term stability.

Trump's presidency thus provides a vivid reminder that negotiation is not merely about technical concessions or final outcomes but also about the process choices leaders make along the way. In this sense, tariffs were less about economics than about performance, signaling, and the art of projecting toughness. Whether this style advanced U.S. interests in the long run remains contested, but as a case study, it illuminates the centrality of process in negotiation.

When Does Toughness Become Unethical? A Look at Trump's Tariff Negotiations

By Peter Kesting

Since his rise to political power, Donald J. Trump has cultivated an image as a dealmaker who thrives in adversarial negotiations. In both business and politics, he has consistently presented himself as a figure willing to disrupt conventional norms in pursuit of favorable agreements. Nowhere was this more visible than in his trade and tariff policies toward key partners such as the European Union, China, Mexico, and Canada. Through a mixture of dramatic threats, unilateral measures, and personal theatrics, Trump reframed tariff negotiations not as incremental, technocratic processes, but as high-stakes confrontations designed for public consumption (Drezner, 2020; Irwin, 2017a).

These moves have generated sharply divergent interpretations. Supporters view Trump's use of leverage and his rejection of multilateral constraints as a pragmatic pushback against decades of

U.S. trade imbalance, an assertive strategy long overdue (Bartash, 2025; Navarro & Autry, 2011). Critics, however, argue that his methods are corrosive and manipulative, relying more on deception and coercion than on fair bargaining, eroding confidence in global institutions, and inflicting significant harm on the world economy, including the United States itself (Beattie, 2018; Greenhouse, 2025; Irwin, 2017b).

This article addresses the central question raised by these divergent views: were Trump's tariff negotiations ethically legitimate examples of hard bargaining, or did they cross the line into unethical manipulation? By analyzing four central practices: deception, coercive threats, personal staging, and disregard for international norms, this article seeks to illuminate the ethically ambiguous space between legitimate strategic bargaining and practices that undermine the moral foundations of negotiation and international cooperation.

Competitive Bargaining and Value Claiming

One possible way to understand Trump's tariff tactics is through the lens of competitive bargaining. The focus here is on value claiming, demanding concessions and seeking to maximize one's own share, often at the expense of the other party (Dawson, 1995; Thompson, 2021). The key strategies of competitive bargaining: setting ambitious opening positions, concealing one's reservation point, applying pressure, or signaling a willingness to walk away, are well established in the negotiation literature and widely applied in both business and diplomacy (Lewicki et al., 2020). Trump's approach to tariffs embodies these tactics with striking clarity. His threats of imposing 25–50% duties on European automobiles, for example, functioned as a classic high anchor. By starting with an extreme demand, he shifted the bargaining zone in his favor, ensuring that any compromise would still yield significant U.S. advantage. Likewise, his readiness to suspend or withdraw from agreements such as NAFTA unless renegotiated projected walk-away power, a central resource in competitive bargaining and a means of pressuring counterparts into concessions.

In this respect, Trump is less an outlier than a practitioner of well-established value-claiming techniques. His blunt style, often perceived as disruptive or norm-breaking, fits squarely within strategies that negotiation theorists regard as rational under highly competitive conditions (Lax & Sebenius, 1986). From the perspective of bargaining theory, his tariff tactics represent a consistent application of these methods, albeit executed with unusual intensity and heightened public staging. In this sense, his record underscores the argument that such strategies, though controversial, can be strikingly effective.

However, the framework of competitive bargaining has important limitations. Unlike a zero-sum contest, international negotiations take place within a complex ecosystem where trust, institutional commitments, and the prospect of long-term cooperation are central (Axelrod, 2009; Keohane, 2005). If one side pushes too hard, the outcome may not simply be redistribution of value, but the destruction of cooperative gains, shared benefits that arise when both sides collaborate. For example, tariff escalations can disrupt supply chains, reduce global efficiency, and generate economic losses that outweigh the benefits achieved for the stronger party (Irwin, 2017a).

The question thus arises: when do aggressive tactics remain part of the acceptable "game" of negotiation, and when do they cross the boundary into unethical manipulation that corrodes the very possibility of future cooperation?

Trump's Negotiation Practices and Their Ethical Evaluation

Trump's tariff negotiations rested on many legitimate textbook techniques, yet they were also characterized by a series of recognizable practices that escalated beyond hard bargaining: deception, threats and the misuse of power, personal staging, and disregard for institutions. Each of these practices can be evaluated not only in terms of their effectiveness but also in light of the ethical standards they challenge.

Deception

A striking feature of Trump's rhetoric was his frequent reliance on distorted or selectively presented information. He consistently emphasized America's "gigantic" trade deficits with the European Union, while downplaying the substantial U.S. surplus in services trade. By presenting a partial and exaggerated picture, Trump framed the EU as an illegitimate beneficiary of global trade rules. Similarly, he celebrated largely symbolic commitments, such as European purchases of American soybeans in 2018 or liquefied natural gas in 2025, as "historic victories," even when these promises were non-binding or market-driven.

From an ethical standpoint, such practices represent more than ordinary framing. They cross into misrepresentation, where the intent is not simply to persuade but to mislead (Carson, 2010; Lewicki, 1983). While all negotiators emphasize their strongest arguments, systematically obscuring the full picture undermines the trust that sustains long-term cooperation (Valley et al., 1998). In many cases, it produces unfair, one-sided advantages that benefit the deceiver in the short term but delegitimize the outcome in the eyes of the disadvantaged party. As a result, opportunities for joint value creation are lost, and negotiations devolve into narrowly distributive contests.

Threats and Misuse of Power

Equally prominent was Trump's reliance on threats. His repeated warnings of 25–50% tariffs on European automobiles exemplified the use of disproportionate pressure, given the centrality of the auto industry to Germany's economy. More striking still were his suggestions that America's NATO commitments could become conditional on allies meeting defense-spending targets, effectively treating collective security as a bargaining chip. In dealings with Mexico and Canada, he brandished the threat of total NAFTA withdrawal unless substantial concessions were made.

These tactics exploit the asymmetry of power between the United States and its partners. They go beyond the ordinary use of leverage, where parties adjust demands based on relative strengths, and enter the terrain of coercion, where the weaker side is left with no realistic alternative (Schelling, 1980). Agreements reached under such conditions may be effective in extracting short-term concessions, but they carry the taint of compulsion rather than voluntary assent. The ethical concern is not simply that threats are unpleasant, but that they compromise the autonomy of negotiating partners and erode the legitimacy of the outcomes (Franck, 2006).

Personal Staging

Trump also elevated the performative dimension of negotiations to an unusual degree. Encounters with European leaders were staged for maximum media visibility, with handshakes, press conferences, and triumphant declarations aimed squarely at domestic audiences. Deals were

cast less as painstaking compromises between complex interests and more as personal victories of Trump the negotiator.

This emphasis on image over substance raises ethical questions. While there is nothing inherently wrong with publicizing successful diplomacy, the transformation of negotiations into spectacles can distort incentives (Jönsson & Hall, 2005). Partners may feel pressured to make symbolic concessions for the sake of optics, while substantive issues remain unresolved. The long-term risk is that international bargaining becomes a theater of posturing rather than a forum for problem-solving, weakening the credibility of commitments and privileging domestic political gains over genuine cooperation (Odell, 2000).

Disregard for Institutions and Norms

Perhaps the most consequential aspect of Trump's approach was his disregard for multilateral institutions. His administration imposed tariffs on steel and aluminum imports under the justification of "national security," a maneuver widely criticized as a misuse of WTO provisions. He threatened to withdraw from the WTO altogether and undermined its dispute settlement mechanism by blocking appointments. Similarly, his skeptical stance toward NATO and his withdrawal from international agreements such as the Paris Climate Accord reflected a broader pattern of sidelining institutions in favor of unilateral action.

The ethical implications here are significant. International institutions embody norms of reciprocity and rule-based cooperation (Keohane, 2005; Ruggie, 1992). Disregarding them may yield tactical flexibility for a powerful actor, but it weakens the collective structures that safeguard fairness and predictability in the global system (Abbott & Snidal, 1998). By prioritizing immediate bargaining advantages over institutional integrity, Trump contributed to the erosion of trust not only between states but also in the very rules designed to stabilize their interactions.

Overall Assessment

Taken together, these moves illustrate a negotiation style that is highly effective in creating pressure but ethically ambiguous at best. The central ethical tension, then, is whether results justify the methods. If one measures success solely in terms of immediate national advantage, Trump's tactics can be defended as pragmatic, even necessary. If, however, one considers the broader requirements of fairness, reciprocity, and sustainability in international relations, his approach risks crossing the boundary from hard bargaining into unethical manipulation.

Outlook: The Risk of "Unethical Myopia"

One of the most pressing concerns raised by Trump's tariff tactics is the phenomenon described as "unethical myopia" (Kesting et al., 2025). The term denotes a strategic fixation on immediate, highly visible victories achieved through aggressive or manipulative means, while disregarding the deeper, longer-term costs these methods impose on relationships, institutions, and systemic stability. The central question therefore becomes: what are the long-term consequences of such an approach?

The first and most obvious cost lies in the damage inflicted on the U.S. economy itself. Tariffs have disrupted global trade flows, provoked retaliatory measures against American exports, especially in services, and fostered uncertainty in markets. By shielding outdated industries, such

as steel or coal, while simultaneously burdening innovative sectors, Trump's policies not only slow modernization but also undermine the country's competitive position in the twenty-first century. The economic harm goes hand in hand with serious political damage to American democracy. Instead of uniting the nation, tariff wars and their underlying rhetoric have deepened divisions, polarized public opinion, and eroded shared values that once anchored the political system.

Equally alarming is the damage done to the global order. Trump's critique of international institutions was not without merit: the world trading system has long been unjust and in need of reform. Yet rather than improving it, aggressive tariff tactics risk tearing down what little stability these frameworks still provide. If multilateral organizations such as the WTO are consistently bypassed, their ability to arbitrate disputes and absorb shocks diminishes. Unless other powers, particularly the European Union and China, invest in sustaining them, institutional resilience will collapse.

The gravest consequence, however, may be normative erosion. Once coercion, manipulation, and the law of the strongest replace cooperation as the guiding principle of international relations, the spirit of partnership gives way to ruthless competition. Smaller states already feel the consequences, as illustrated by recent disputes involving Switzerland, and the human cost of such a shift is immense. Ultimately, the normalization of unethical myopia risks creating a harsher, more fragmented world in which the pursuit of power eclipses the possibility of shared progress.

Counteroffers Under Pressure: How States Negotiated Trump's Tariff Escalations

By Daniel Druckman, Remigiusz Smolinski, Lynn Wagner

The Trump administration marked a sharp shift in U.S. trade policy, with unilateral tariffs deployed as "negotiation by other means." This strategy posed a fundamental challenge to America's trading partners: should they accept, retaliate, build coalitions, or turn to international institutions? For many countries, there was initially no negotiation at all, as Trump's new tariffs went into effect without evidence of a response. Only those that countered Trump's tariff announcements effectively initiated a negotiation process, opening the door for negotiation dynamics to unfold.

While the legality of the tariffs makes its way through the American judicial system, it seems clear that aggressive bargaining will continue under this administration making an analysis of response strategies valuable. We examine how countries responded to the first wave of Trump's tariffs and the consequences of those choices. At its core, the research asks: how did selected countries respond to the initial tariffs imposed by the Trump administration, and what were the short-term results of these responses? By focusing on strategies ranging from retaliation and partial retaliation to acceptance and coalition-building, we aim to shed light on the dynamics of negotiation under pressure.

The theoretical lens guiding our work highlights the role of counteroffers (Lipp et al. 2023; Teichmann et al. 2025) and the classic tension between "hard vs. hard" and "hard vs. soft" bargaining (Huffmeier et al. 2011). In the context of coercive diplomacy, Trump's tariffs raise a central negotiation question: does retaliation work? We address this question by analyzing the responses of four major targets of U.S. tariffs: China, the European Union, Canada, and Mexico.

These economies were among the most powerful and most directly affected by Trump's measures, but their strategies were also critical to shaping the trajectory of global trade and negotiation norms.

Interestingly, in 2023, the European Union recorded the largest total goods trade with the United States, approximately USD 975.9 billion (exports: USD 370.2 billion; imports: USD 605.8 billion), surpassing Mexico (USD 839.9 billion), Canada (USD 762.1 billion), and China (USD 582.4 billion). While China accounted for the largest trade deficit at around USD 295.4 billion, the EU was not far behind with a deficit of approximately USD 235.6 billion. The deficits with Mexico (USD 171.9 billion) and Canada (USD 63.3 billion) were roughly one-half and one-fourth, respectively, of China's deficit (U.S. Census Bureau, 2024).

Our approach combines comparative case analysis with a close reading of government statements, trade statistics, policy documents, and media reporting. We analyze each case separately before drawing broader conclusions about patterns of response and negotiation outcomes. This dual focus on immediate reactions, such as retaliation, partial retaliation, or acceptance, and longer-term strategies, such as issue linkage, coalition-building, and institutionalization, allows us to trace the bargaining processes over time. By doing so, we extend our understanding of how retaliation functions not in the abstract but in situ, within the interplay of national interests, negotiation dynamics, and international relationships.

In moving beyond a largely economic lens, this article contributes to both international negotiation theory and policy practice. It highlights links between strategies and outcomes, offering insights of particular relevance to readers of Negotiation and Conflict Management Research who are concerned with how states adapt under pressure and how negotiation unfolds when the opening move is coercive.

Country Responses to Initial U.S. Tariffs

European Union

In Europe, the symbolism of Trump's "Liberation Day" tariffs landed with particular force. Announced on April 2, 2025, the measures branded the EU, the U.S.' largest trading partner, a chronic offender in trade imbalances and reset the tone of transatlantic relations. What had begun as a series of steel and aluminum disputes now expanded into a direct challenge to the economic partnership that had long underpinned NATO allies.

By July 1, Washington made good on the threats: a 30 percent tariff would soon apply to EU imports. European leaders responded with sharp rhetoric and threats of retaliation. Commission President Ursula von der Leyen insisted that Brussels had been negotiating for a 10 percent compromise, highlighting Europe's preference for bargaining over confrontation.

The EU's strategy unfolded in three steps. First, it signaled readiness to retaliate with counter-tariffs on politically sensitive U.S. products. Second, member states coordinated through Brussels, ensuring that no country broke ranks and weakened the collective stance. Third, with German automakers facing devastating losses, the EU pivoted toward de-escalation.

The Turnberry agreement of July 27, 2025, reflected this balancing act. Trump and von der Leyen announced a compromise: tariffs would be set at 15 percent, half the threatened level, while the EU committed to massive U.S. energy and arms purchases and new investment projects. Trump suspended further escalation and claimed victory.

Lesson learned: The EU bought time through retaliation and coalition unity, but asymmetric pressure on a vulnerable sector forced costly concessions. In such settings, defensive distributive

tactics preserve credibility but rarely create integrative opportunities.

China

On April 2, Trump declared that U.S. tariffs on Chinese goods would surge toward 145 percent, adding to the 125 percent counter-tariffs already in place from Beijing. The U.S. had the largest trade deficit with China, which was Trump's stated focus for introducing tariffs, and investors reacted nervously while Beijing faced the challenge of balancing firmness at home with reassurance abroad.

China's immediate strategy was threefold. It reaffirmed retaliation by increasing tariffs, imposing additional levies of up to 15 % on key U.S. agricultural products, and expanding non-tariff restrictions on U.S. food imports It appealed to institutions, filing new WTO complaints despite the paralysis of the dispute system. And it pursued coalition-building, deepening ties within Asia through RCEP and ASEAN, while cultivating South–South partnerships to hedge reliance on U.S. markets.

On May 12, market pressure pushed both sides into a truce: U.S. tariffs dropped back to 30 percent, Chinese tariffs to 10 percent, and limited agricultural trade resumed. Equities and commodities surged in relief.

Summer negotiations turned contentious again. Washington demanded expanded Chinese purchases of soybeans and LNG, as well as revenue-sharing from firms using U.S. technology such as Nvidia and AMD. China resisted, refusing structural concessions on subsidies, technology transfer, and state-owned enterprises. In July, the two sides extended the tariff freeze until November, preventing renewed escalation but leaving disputes unresolved.

Lesson learned: China combined retaliation, institutional appeals, and coalition-building to preserve credibility and avoid making concessions. The result was a temporary truce rather than resolution. When powers are evenly matched, negotiations often default to tit-for-tat dynamics, more akin to an arms race than integrative bargaining.

Canada

For Canada, the tariff escalation of 2025 did not begin with Trump's April "Liberation Day" speech but weeks earlier. On February 1, Washington imposed 25 percent tariffs on Canadian imports, sparing only a portion of the energy sector. The April announcement simply confirmed that Ottawa would be swept into a larger, systemic confrontation with the United States.

Canada struck back with CA$30 billion in retaliatory tariffs, targeting politically sensitive American exports. This visible show of resistance was paired with institutional framing: Canadian officials emphasized that Washington was bound by the US/Mexico/Canada Agreement (USMCA) obligations and that the 2026 scheduled review would be the proper venue for dispute settlement. Prime Minister Mark Carney also sought partners abroad, exploring coordination with Mexico and the EU.

By mid-2025, Canada's strategy produced a stalemate. No bilateral bargain was struck, but Ottawa had preserved credibility while keeping escalation in check. The dispute was effectively deferred to the institutional arena, where Canada hoped its treaty leverage would be strongest.

Lesson learned: Canada illustrates how a smaller state can use targeted retaliation and institutional rules to resist asymmetric pressure. By anchoring the conflict in USMCA, Ottawa limited Washington's room for unilateral maneuvering without having to concede.

Mexico

Mexico's response to Trump's tariffs was shaped less by timing and more by sectoral vulnerability. With the auto industry at the heart of its economy, the April 2 "Liberation Day" tariffs threatened not just trade balances but the stability of a key national industry.

Mexico's strategy was therefore calibrated. It imposed counter-tariffs on U.S. goods but simultaneously negotiated a one-month delay in the application of certain U.S. measures, buying breathing space for its auto sector. Rhetorically, Mexican leaders avoided escalation, stressing that disputes should be addressed within USMCA mechanisms rather than through unilateral pressure.

By mid-2025, Mexico pivoted firmly to institutional containment. Plans for a trilateral summit with Canada underscored this approach, framing regional solidarity as the best counterweight to U.S. coercion.

The outcome was a managed conflict rather than resolution. Mexico's selective concessions preserved stability, and its reliance on USMCA institutions limited escalation. Unlike the EU, which conceded under asymmetric pressure, or China, which remained in stalemate, Mexico managed to protect its core industry without ceding broad ground.

Lesson learned: Mexico shows that calibrated retaliation, sectoral protection, and institutional anchoring can be powerful tools for weaker states. By resisting escalation and safeguarding vulnerable industries, Mexico kept trade flowing while avoiding major concessions.

Comparative Observations

In the opening months of Trump's second-term tariff campaign, all major trading partners initially met U.S. escalation with retaliatory signals to preserve credibility. Yet their paths diverged sharply. The European Union rallied as a bloc and ultimately agreed to the Turnberry framework, settling on a 15% tariff (down from the threatened 30%), in exchange for EU commitments to purchase USD 750 billion in U.S. energy and invest USD 600 billion in the U.S. China countered with sustained escalation, raising tariffs to 125 % and implementing broad non-tariff barriers, but avoided making concessions, achieving only a temporary truce. Canada and Mexico turned to institutional anchoring via USMCA, preserving exemptions and shifting dispute settlement into formal, structured review mechanisms. These cases show strategically divergent paths: concession (EU), confrontation without compromise (China), and institutional deferral (Canada, Mexico).

Overall, retaliation paid off. It consistently secured better terms than immediate acceptance, effectively transforming Trump's unilateral tariffs, initially framed as non-negotiable demands, into negotiable offers.

Discussion

Trump's second-term tariff campaign, launched during his "Liberation Day" speech, serves as a clear illustration of coercive negotiation in asymmetric international relations. The shared opening move of retaliation preserved credibility across partners, signaling resolve and deterring one-sided concessions. This mirrors core negotiation theory: when faced with coercion, actors must re-establish parity to preserve bargaining space (see Tedeschi & Bonoma, 1977). However, sustainable resolution depended on strategic follow-through.

The EU's combination of retaliation and concession yielded a tangible deal: capped tariffs and

sweeping U.S. market access commitments. Conversely, China's high-intensity retaliation and regulatory counterweights produced only transient relief, not structural agreement. Canada and Mexico's reliance on USMCA safeguards successfully deescalated conflict without bilateral give-ins.

These contrasts reveal that retaliation, while necessary to preserve credibility and open room for negotiation, is never sufficient on its own. What determines whether disputes spiral, stabilize, or resolve is the secondary strategy, be it costly concessions, institutional anchoring, or coalition alignment, that follows the initial pushback. The four cases therefore emphasize that coercion can force bargaining, but durable agreements require a transition from distributive to integrative moves. Such moves may take the form of face-saving concessions, institutional mechanisms, or issue linkages that allow both sides to capture value despite asymmetry.

Policy Implications

Our analysis of the four tariff disputes leads to several practical suggestions with implications for policymakers. Three lessons in particular are highlighted in this concluding section:

First, coercive strategies can pay off in the short term. It is no surprise that strong trading partners, such as the U.S., can leverage their power by making demands on weaker trading partners. We observed that roughly 80% of nations in the global trading system accepted the Trump tariffs without initiating a discussion. Thus, at least in the short term, stronger economies can use tariff policies to shape trading relationships. However, the different outcomes for the U.S.' largest trading partner (the EU) vis-à-vis China, Mexico, and Canada indicate that while relative trading power matters, it does not tell the whole story.

Second, retaliation is necessary but not sufficient. Each of the four U.S. trading partners analyzed in this article retaliated in response to the U.S. tariff demand. Each succeeded to some extent in lowering the demand. However, the EU paid a steep price by giving in sooner than needed. They made costly concessions in other sectors to secure the 15% tariff. This may have been avoided if they harnessed their own considerable relative power in the global trading system.

Third, negotiation strategy shapes whether disputes spiral or stabilize. The negotiating challenge in asymmetric power situations is to sustain a bilateral process geared to producing fair trade agreements. By turning aggressive demands into first offers, opening bargaining space, sticking to high levels of aspiration, and searching for integrative elements in an otherwise distributive process, the four trading partners achieved better results than the Liberation Day tariffs. The goal is to hammer out deals that work for both countries. These kinds of deals require skills developed through training and experience. The EU negotiators got retaliation right but missed opportunities to follow up with a negotiation process that served their interests and avoid further intimidation.

Together these lessons offer advantages for relatively strong and weak trading partners. As the global trading system reacts and evolves in the face of the disruptions introduced by Trump's tariffs, national decision makers will need to consider the balance between coercion to set the process in motion and retaliation to keep it going in the direction of extended negotiation. This assessment will be important as they consider their next moves.

A Phased Model of Competition and Integration: Trump's China Tariff Negotiation (April–September 2025)

By Qi Wang Schlupp

On April 2, 2025, the White House announced Liberation Day, positioning this date as a pivotal moment in U.S. trade policy characterized by economic independence and industrial revitalization (The White House, 2025). The accompanying global tariff increases sent shockwaves through international markets and generated widespread criticism. Critics called these policies impulsive. Rothkopf (2025) questioned Trump's mental capacity while O'Donnell labeled him "the stupidest man in the Situation Room" (MSNBC, 2025), and Gasiorek dismissed the policy as "bonkers" (Times Radio, 2025). These critiques echo pre-election warnings from 16 Nobel Prize-winning economists who cautioned that "Trump and the vagaries of his actions and policies threaten [the] stability and the U.S.'s standing in the world" (Picchi, 2024). Such media portrayal may have influenced overall perception, with 61% of Americans disapproving Trump's tariff policy (Kiley et al., 2025).

However, these policies are unlikely to have resulted from Trump alone, but from consultation with his economic cabinet of internationally recognized experts: his Council of Economic Advisers including Stephen Miran, Pierre Yared, Kim Ruhl, DJ Nordquist, Aaron Hedlund, Morris Davis, and Jonathan Ketcham, alongside key advisers Peter Navarro, Russell Vought, Scott Bessent, Howard Lutnick, and Stephen Moore. Such experts could not have collectively endorsed an erratic move. This suggests the question: What negotiation framework and strategies might Trump and his cabinet be using to achieve what they consider a fair trading system?

From a negotiation perspective, Trump and his cabinet's dramatic tariff announcements may constitute a deliberate strategy that initiates a controlled bargaining process. This approach could leverage two well-documented psychological phenomena: the extreme first offer effect, where initiating with an unusually high demand often shifts the final agreement favorably toward the initiator, and the anchoring effect, a cognitive bias whereby negotiators unconsciously adjust their judgments toward the first numeric value presented (Galinsky & Mussweiler, 2001; Lipp et al., 2022; Tversky & Kahneman, 1974). Public attention likely amplifies these effects. While extreme anchoring can backfire (Schweinsberg et al., 2012), Trump and his cabinet might have employed aggressive opening positions as initial phases of broader bargaining strategy, anticipating subsequent adjustments designed to extract concessions and establish favorable negotiation conditions.

This analysis adopts a strategic negotiation framework to examine U.S.-China tariff negotiations from April 2 to September 5, 2025, while maintaining political neutrality. The study proceeds through three sections: an examination of Trump's negotiation approach and development of a phased competitive-integrative model; application of this model to the tariff negotiations; and conclusions with suggestions for practitioners.

Competitive and Integrative Negotiation and Trump's Negotiation Principles

Competitive vs. Integrative Approaches

Negotiation theory distinguishes between competitive and integrative orientations. Competitive strategies employ distributive, adversarial behaviors to maximize gains at the counterpart's expense, reflecting a zero-sum view of finite resources (Bhatia et al., 2023). Putnam and Poole (1987) identified typical competitive strategies including extreme initial demands, minimal concessions, inflated valuations, communication dominance, information withholding, and prioritizing immediate material gains over relationship preservation.

Integrative strategies focus on collaboration to maximize joint gains through mutual benefit, open information exchange, and creative solutions (Lewicki & Tomlinson, 2014). The Harvard Project on Negotiation outlines seven core integrative principles: relationship building, effective communication, interest-based bargaining, generating multiple options, applying mutually respected criteria, assessing BATNA (best alternative to a negotiated agreement), and implementing equitable commitments (Fisher & Shapiro, 2005).

A Phased Competitive-Integrative Model

Whereas integrative strategies are widely endorsed, some scholars support blended approaches in complex, multi-session negotiations. Gulliver (1979) found that mutual gains became achievable once parties shifted to integrative strategies, regardless of initial positions. Hunsaker et al. (2022) observed that negotiators beginning aggressively but transitioning to collaboration achieved greater satisfaction than those starting cooperatively but becoming adversarial. Holmes (1992) argued that combining both approaches across sessions enhances joint outcomes while reducing impasse risk. Putnam and Jones (1982) found that negotiations ending with agreements mostly resulted from combined use of both approaches, whereas those ending in impasse resulted from distributive approaches only.

The above studies suggest competitive strategies may serve constructive purposes in multi-session negotiations. Appropriate use of power and pressure can force parties beyond their comfort zones to identify unforeseen solutions (Putnam & Jones, 1982). In the tariff situation, because rebalancing global tariffs involves high-stakes, high-uncertainty issues requiring multiple rounds, using both approaches strategically may optimally compel both parties to explore underlying interests and identify creative, mutually acceptable solutions.

Additionally, Oliver's (1980) expectancy-disconfirmation theory proposes that satisfaction derives from comparing pre-encounter expectancy with post-encounter experience. Low expectancies are more readily disconfirmed than high ones—explaining why audiences feel more moved when villains perform conscientious acts than when heroes do. Trump's harsh opening might have deliberately lowered China's expectations, making subsequent concessions generate positive disconfirmation and greater satisfaction. This suggests negotiators can strategically reset counterpart expectancies through competitive-integrative alternation, though this requires considerable skill to avoid undermining trust.

Given that Trump's tariff policies have oscillated between dominance (e.g., high tariff increases) and concessions (e.g., truces), the author proposes analyzing them through a phased competitive-integrative model: the strategic alternation between competition and collaboration that continuously resets reference points as negotiations progress and new information is

exchanged. This model captures both competitive and collaborative strategies and, over time, may reveal nonlinear patterns with drastic twists and turns driven internally by negotiation progression and externally by global events. Before applying this framework, it is necessary to understand Trump's foundational negotiation principles.

Trump's Negotiation Principles

In The Art of the Deal, Trump (1987) outlines 11 elements of dealmaking that show notable alignment with integrative strategies while retaining competitive undertones. His approach emphasizes ambitious goals, strategic thinking, and leveraging power effectively.

Eight elements reflect integrative approaches: think big supports long-term goal-setting, protect the downside mirrors BATNA preparation, maximize options aligns with principled negotiation, and know your market improves option identification. Elements like deliver the goods and contain the cost emphasize integrity essential for trust-building. Have fun shows a positive attitude.

Three elements: use leverage, get the word out, and fight back, demonstrate strategic use of power, supporting integrative goals when applied ethically or reflecting competitive goals when used tactically.

Among his principles, think big serves as the guiding vision, while use leverage embodies the operation foundation. Trump writes:

The best thing you can do is deal from strength, and leverage is the biggest strength you can have. Leverage is having something the other guy wants. Or better yet, needs. Or best of all, simply cannot do without (Trump, 1987, p. 11).

Notably, none of Trump's principles are purely distributive; each incorporates collaborative elements while maintaining an undertone of power and control. This hybrid nature reflects negotiating from positions of demonstrated capability—an approach that aligns with the phased competitive-integrative model when dealing with powerful counterparts like China.

Applying the Phased Model in U.S.-China Tariff Negotiation

The U.S.-China trade war officially began in July 2018, continuing tensions that had built since China's WTO membership in 2001 (Swanson, 2018). The White House identified five core issues: imbalanced trade practices, intellectual property theft, unfair state-led economic policies, national security risks, and illicit fentanyl trafficking (Council on Foreign Relations Editors, 2025; Hurlburt, 2025). In Trump's second term, he immediately employed tariffs to address these concerns. This analysis focuses on the period from April 2 to September 5, 2025, drawing its timeline primarily from Bown (2025), Feingold and Botwright (2025), and Jeyaretnam (2025).

Phase One (April 2-17): Initial Competition

Trump's April 2 announcement of 34% tariffs on Chinese goods exemplified competitive anchoring, maximizing demands while framing the U.S. as trade victim. China counter-anchored with matching tariffs and rare earth export restrictions, leading to escalation through mid-April (US tariffs reaching 125%, China responding with 84% tariffs plus trade bans).

Trump's approach reflected his think big principle: "I aim very high, and then I just keep pushing and pushing and pushing to get what I'm after" (Trump, 1987, p. 45). However, China's rare earth elements (REEs) leverage, controlling over 70% of global mining and 90% of refinement

capacity—proved formidable (DW Chinese, 2025; IRIS NRC, 2024), while China's vulnerabilities in U.S. market access provided countervailing leverage (Zhu et al., 2025). This interdependence prevented either side from achieving dominance, enabling Phase Two's collaborative shift.

Phase Two (May 10-13): Initial Integration

To avoid impasse, delegations met in Geneva on May 10, achieving agreement within 48 hours: tariffs reduced to 10% with 90-day suspensions. This marked clear integration—softened positions, interest exchange, and mutually acceptable outcomes.

Xi's May 13 statement, "There are no winners in tariff wars. Bullying and hegemony will only lead to self-isolation" (DawnNews English, 2025), reflected competitive labeling within collaborative outcomes, illustrating how both strategies intertwine in multi-session negotiations. The agreement demonstrated mutual capacity for compromise while preserving core positions.

Phase Three (June 5-July 30): Sustained Integration

This phase highlights substantive diplomatic engagements, including the first Trump-Xi phone call since January, London talks on implementing prior agreements, and Stockholm meetings addressing REEs, fentanyl trafficking, and Russian oil purchases. Although no formal agreements emerged from the Stockholm meetings, the sustained efforts to fulfill commitments and address unresolved issues reflect integration.

Phase Four (August 1-September 5): Strategic Turbulence

This phase demonstrates purposeful leverage flexing within integrative frameworks—both sides strategically displaying capability while affirming peace-seeking intentions. The approach reflects what might be termed strength-based diplomacy—combining demonstrated capability with cooperative intent to establish credible foundations for meaningful negotiation. This concept draws on both Hadrian's diplomatic methods while governing Rome (Everitt, 2013) and the Reagan administration's foreign policy principle of peace through strength (Reagan, 1980).

The U.S. excluded China from August 1 reciprocal tariff adjustments yet announced a 90-day truce 10 days later—signaling that pressure and cooperation could coexist strategically. Despite tariffs reaching 50-55%, rare earth magnet shipments resumed and talks remained steady (Ingraham Angle, 2025), suggesting competitive pressure was yielding integrative outcomes.

Both sides employed nearly identical approaches of demonstrating strength while advocating peace. Trump's August 24 remarks exemplified this: declaring "we have incredible cards ... (to) destroy China" while praising improved relations and expressing delight for Xi's invitation to visit (CNBC Television, 2025). China's September 3 Victory Day parade featuring Putin, Kim, and Pezeshkian demonstrated deterrent capacity while Xi stated humans "must work together in solidarity and live in harmony" (CCTV, 2025).

Thus, both sides demonstrated that potent threats facilitate genuine cooperation. The Chinese student agreement (600,000 admissions) occurred (Reuters, 2025b) precisely because both had proven their escalation capacity, lending weight to subsequent cooperative gestures. This calculated leverage serves as insurance against exploitation, creating conditions where meaningful compromises become possible through established capacity.

Discussion

Trump's aggressive April 2 anchoring strategy exemplifies what he calls bravado: "I play to people's fantasies... People want to believe that something is the biggest and the greatest and the most spectacular. I call it truthful hyperbole" (Trump, 1987, p. 58). Though theatrical, this opening was strategic—provoking engagement, increasing publicity, and compelling counterparts to reveal their positions.

This article applies a phased competitive-integrative model to analyze Trump's tariff negotiations with China. The alternation between these strategic orientations appears driven by strength-based diplomacy. Because China possesses genuine capacity to resist U.S. pressure, Trump deploys his full strategic arsenal: strength flexing (leveraging), stakeholder engagement (know your market), public messaging (get the word out), tactical concessions (protect the downside), option development (maximize options), and retaliation (fight back). With allies like the EU and Japan, Trump leans more toward integrative approaches while maintaining the implicit strength of U.S. leadership. With weaker adversaries like Iran and Cuba, he employs overt competitive approaches through direct sanctions.

Trump's approach has limitations beyond escalation risks. His dominant persona may obscure integrative intentions, risking misinterpretation and impasse. More critically, he must distinguish his approach across different relationship types: maintaining cooperative frameworks with allies while reserving competitive positioning for ambiguous counterparts. The challenge lies in ensuring that allies do not perceive his hardline stance toward China as indicative of how he might treat them, lest he appears incapable of genuine partnership and damages long-term strategic relationships.

For practitioners, Trump's interactions with Xi offer valuable lessons despite his imperfections as a negotiator. First, skilled negotiators establish credibility through demonstrated competence and integrity: ethical clarity and substantive leverage enable meaningful counterproposals. Second, high-stakes, complex issues require long-term planning across multiple sessions and flexible deployment of both competitive and integrative strategies. Third, success depends on adapting quickly to evolving situational and relational dynamics.

Conclusion

The phased model reveals that both Trump and Xi employ similar approaches, demonstrating that credible power enables credible peace overtures. However, strength-based diplomacy becomes dangerous when both sides are equally powerful and prepared to mirror every move. As this article is completed, Trump advocates renaming the Department of Defense to the Department of War (Durkee, 2025), a move that may relate to China's Victory Day parade and signals escalating tensions. When power displays become overly competitive, sensible negotiation requires stepping back to explore creative options, strategic pauses, and calibrated concessions.

This analysis ends at the phase of strategic turbulence. It is now up to both countries' leaders to prevent uncontrolled escalation and instead pursue wise diplomacy that achieves mutual fairness.

From Rules to Power in Global Trade: US' Strategic Shift in a Polycentric World

By Giovanna Maria Dora Dore & Siniša Vuković

For much of the post–World War II era, international economic exchange has been organized within a framework of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) and its successor, the World Trade Organization (WTO). Built upon the twin foundations of the most-favored-nation (MFN) principle and reciprocity, these institutions were designed to curb unilateralism, increase predictability, and limit the capacity of states to employ coercion in trade relations. The MFN principle embodies the rule of nondiscrimination, stipulating that imports of an identical product from different countries are entitled to receive the same treatment within a given market. Reciprocity refers to the expectation that trade bargains should remain balanced, ensuring that the tariff liberalization agreed upon provides each country with the prospect of an increase in its export volume that is commensurate in value to the increase in imports it permits. MFN and Reciprocity are intended to restrain the exercise of power, thereby leveling the playing field and making countries accountable through formal dispute settlement procedures (Jackson, 1989).

Recent trade actions undertaken by the United States can be interpreted as an attempt to break away from existing rules-based constraints and use power in ways that constitute an existential threat to the current multilateral trading system. This involves abandoning the MFN principle and advancing a new understanding of reciprocity, defined not by negotiated concessions but by existing tariff levels, which is without precedent in the GATT/WTO system. Such a reconfiguration can effectively dismantle the rules-based multilateral framework and replace it with a power-based system in which states negotiate unconstrained by any codified, or mutually agreed trade rules (Bagwell et al., 2016).

Bargaining tariffs

Bargaining tariffs are tariff levels deliberately increased beyond the binding commitments undertaken by a state in its trade agreements. They are imposed with the objective of leveraging coercive bargaining power to induce reciprocal tariff reductions from trading partners, as well as recalibrate the distributive balance of existing trade agreements in favor of the initiating country. While the most recent U.S. tariff escalations exemplify the practice of bargaining tariffs, the rationale for invoking such instruments as necessary to secure tariff concessions from U.S. trading partners is not obvious. Bargaining tariffs, in fact, have not been used during the last seventy years of successful multilateral trade liberalization under the GATT and the WTO. Over this period, industrialized economies engaged recurrently in successive negotiating rounds, sharing in the positive-sum gains generated by reciprocal liberalization, which incrementally advanced them toward the international efficiency frontier (Markowitz, 1959 [1970]).

So, what is different now? In the case of U.S. bargaining tariffs against advanced economies, such as Japan, Canada and the European Union, where the process of reciprocal MFN tariff bargaining has for the most part been exhausted, they could be used to stimulate negotiations. Since the majority of the positive-sum efficiency gains from reciprocal tariff liberalization among these countries were realized in earlier rounds of trade agreements, any further negotiations would, at best, result in a redistribution of the benefits already accrued from globalization. Therefore, the U.S. is renegotiating the distribution of benefits in a zero-sum manner, using threats rather than

cooperative negotiation typical of the rules-based system (Bagwell et al., 2016).

In the case of emerging economies, however, such as India, China which remained largely inactive during earlier phases of reciprocal liberalization, but whose markets and protection have grown to exert influence, the use of bargaining tariffs has resulted in a latecomer's problem (Lin, 2016). While reciprocal tariff liberalization would yield efficiency gains, the advanced economies have little to offer in reciprocal tariffs bargaining—having already undertaken extensive reciprocal liberalization among themselves and maintaining relatively low levels of protection (Bagwell & Staiger, 2014). In this situation, given the tariff commitments already undertaken by the United States, the threat of bargaining tariffs becomes necessary to make emerging economies lower their tariffs. For U.S. bargaining tariffs to be able to rebalance the terms of existing trade agreements to its own advantage, it must target trade partners that are unable to mount an equally strong counter-threat. Bilateral trade imbalances can therefore serve as a practical indicator for identifying potential partners against whom U.S. bargaining tariffs are most likely to succeed. As such, recent U.S. trade policies reflect a view that sees the negotiation of additional trade agreements as a zero-sum exercise, or constrained by the latecomer's problem, and bilateral trade deficits as a metric to identify trading partners for whom U.S. bargaining tariffs create credible and consequential threat.

These realities suggests a shift in the logic of trade negotiation: from mutual gain through cooperation to the pursuit of national advantage through coercion and help understand why the United States has chosen to target countries with which it runs large bilateral trade deficits. The specific timing of this strategic shift is best understood through the lens of polycentrism, which describes an international system defined not just by the number of powerful states, but more critically, by the rise of multiple, influential normative centers (Ostrom, 2010; Vuković & Dore, 2025). These centers actively promote their own distinct sets of values, rules, and governance models, challenging the previously accepted rules-based international order. The decay of this old normative architecture and the emergence of competing visions for global order provide the essential context for the United States' decision to abandon a system it once championed. The turn toward coercive, power-based trade is a direct reaction to this new reality, where the U.S. perceives its own interests as better served by leveraging its power transactionally rather than upholding universal rules in a world that is no longer unipolar.

In 1947, the United States was the unquestioned hegemon of the world economy and played a central role in the creation of the GATT. Back then it was in the Unites States' self-interest to support a rules-based system that limited the ability of all participants to exercise power as a bargaining tool. However, as the primacy of the United States began waning, its support began eroding while the use of power as a lever to improve its terms of trade became more frequent, thus precipitating the collapse of the rules-based system. From this perspective, the decline in U.S. support for the WTO, which arguably began long before the current administration, could reflect its declining primacy and its disinterest in engaging with emerging powers. Evidence of power-based bargaining could already be seen in the strategy used by the major players in the GATT Uruguay Round to deal with holdouts in creating the WTO, namely, withdrawing from GATT and acceding to the newly formed WTO. In fact, a commitment to MFN and reciprocity harm the exercise of power. This commitment clearly benefits the weak, but it is also valuable for powerful countries, especially when they are at their most powerful. This is because primacy countries face the greatest difficulty committing not to exploit the weak ex-post, once the bargaining has begun and the latter become vulnerable to exclusion from trade deals between the primacy countries and other weak countries. In the absence of this commitment, the weak can stay away from the bargaining table, depriving every other country of any gains from trade bargaining. By creating a

framework that restrain the strong, the rules-based system encourages participation of a broader set of countries in the global economy, to the benefit of both the most powerful countries and the weak ones.

The costs of abandoning a rules-based system

Current U.S. trade policies "rely on what is essentially a myopic logic" (Mattoo & Steiger, 2019, p. 11). In rules-based systems, reputational factors and fundamental norms of cooperation are as important as MFN and reciprocity. As such, U.S. trade policies are inflicting significant damage to the rules-based trade system, and likely to undermine the U.S. own national interests. If a country deviates from a prior agreement and uses bargaining tariffs against a weaker trading partner with which it runs a bilateral trade deficit, it may then become acceptable for its other bargaining partners to resort to the same strategy. If this happens, any initial bargaining advantage a country enjoys from being the first to exploit this strategy would quickly disappear. In fact, it may be hard to maintain any cooperation at all because of the multilateral enforcement issues that may arise in this setting. By breaking the rules today, the U.S. sets a precedent against a commitment mechanism and the benefits of an effective rules-based system. Further, undermining WTO rules could be detrimental in other ways. MFN and reciprocity can mitigate both the strategic behavior and the bargaining frictions that accompany such behavior. This was the case of the early GATT negotiating rounds, when the presumption of balance in the terms bargaining powers created a better negotiating climate than that of bilateral negotiations. Finally, it contrasts historical evidence showing that bargaining tariffs do not lead to desirable or efficient outcomes.

Conclusion

Ultimately, the U.S. departure from the rules-based system is both a symptom and an accelerant of an emerging polycentric world. In an international system increasingly characterized by deep normative divergence and competing economic blocs, a unilateral turn toward power-based bargaining is unlikely to restore American primacy. Instead, it sets a potent precedent that risks further fragmenting global economic governance, as other normative centers are incentivized to adopt similar coercive tactics. The paramount challenge for the future will be managing trade relations in a fractured landscape that lacks a universally accepted rulebook, where the potential for regional disorder grows and cooperation on shared global problems becomes ever more arduous.

Editor's Conclusions

This inaugural edition of Expert Perspectives has brought together leading scholars from our community to analyze President Trump's "Liberation Day" tariff campaign through complementary lenses. Horacio Falcão and Rodrigo Gouveia showed how Trump's negotiation logic followed a consistent hard-bargaining algorithm that prioritized power and pressure. Chin-Chung Chao in The Art of the Tariff Deal revealed how process mechanisms: framing, coercive diplomacy, and deadline pressure, created visible leverage but undermined long-term durability. Peter Kesting in When Does Toughness Become Unethical? argued that Trump's tactics exposed

the ethical fault line where legitimate hard bargaining slips into manipulation and coercion. Daniel Druckman, Remigiusz Smolinski, and Lynn Wagner demonstrated that while the European Union, China, Canada, and Mexico all retaliated, their strategies diverged markedly in how they balanced confrontation with concession. Qi Wang Schlupp traced the U.S.-China tariff battle through distinct phases of competition and attempted integration, highlighting both escalation dynamics and fragile pauses. Finally, Giovanna Maria Dora Dore and Siniša Vuković situated these developments in the larger systemic shift from a rules-based trading order toward a polycentric, power-driven world economy.

Taken together, these perspectives underscore the value of analyzing the same negotiation from multiple expert angles. Each highlights different mechanisms, responses, and implications, yet a common thread emerges: the tension between short-term leverage and long-term consequences. Trump's tariff strategy produced visible concessions and headlines, but it also raised enduring questions about durability, trust, and the stability of the trading system.

By curating these analyses, Expert Perspectives demonstrates the richness that comes from combining academic expertise with timely reflection on recent events. The format is designed to shorten research cycles, stimulate scholarly dialogue, and connect theory more directly with policy and practice.

Looking ahead, we plan for Expert Perspectives to become a recurring feature of NCMR. We invite our readers to share feedback on this new format and to suggest negotiation cases, themes, or emerging issues that would benefit from multiple scholarly viewpoints. Your input will help shape future editions and ensure that this forum reflects both the intellectual breadth and the practical relevance of our community.

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