

# A New Global Economic Governance – Perspectives for International Cooperation

## Chapter 2

# A WTO without the United States?

## Possible But Unlikely

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In July 1944, tucked away in the White Mountains of New Hampshire, negotiators from 44 countries sought to achieve something improbable and entirely without precedent: the creation of a global economic architecture based not on power, but on mutually agreed rules and on cooperation rather than coercion.

At the onset of the meeting, the outcome of the Second World War was largely a foregone conclusion. Fierce fighting continued in Europe and in the Pacific, but the conflict had tilted decidedly in the direction of the allies. Leaders in Washington and London had devoted considerable thought to the political and economic origins of the war and were determined to avert a recurrence of that horrific confrontation. Their goal was a new paradigm in which every country had a stake and in which quarrels would be resolved before they escalated.

**Cracks generated by political pressures appeared in the multilateral trading system**

But this Anglo-Saxon blueprint – in which the United States was indispensable – soon proved too narrow to accommodate the interests of an ever-larger group of governments. This was particularly true with respect to rules governing international trade. Almost as soon as the multilateral trading system was created, cracks generated by political pressures appeared. As the global network of rules expanded and the number of participating countries swelled, these cracks were covered up but never fully repaired.

## America's Long-Term Skepticism

For a time, the system functioned well enough, enduring as long as members, not least the United States, could accept its principles and rules. But doubts were sown in Washington at an early stage and US skepticism of the system's value grew. Trade is a political issue in all corners of the world, but in the United States, a country with a far smaller dependency on trade than its European or Asian counterparts, trade has a toxic edge.

The United States was the lone country that failed to ratify the International Trade Organization envisioned at Bretton Woods. In 1971, US President Richard Nixon terminated the Bretton Woods agreement on the convertibility of the dollar, froze prices for 90 days and slapped a ten percent duty on imports into the United States.<sup>1</sup>

This was but a foretaste of the US unilateralism to come. In his first term, Donald Trump openly questioned US participation in the WTO. He claimed that WTO legal rulings were rigged against the United States and the rules were skewed to put US exporters at a competitive disadvantage. Trump's charges against the WTO were mostly false. But they resonated.

By 2016, when he was first elected, anti-trade sentiment had snowballed to such a degree that Trump faced little domestic opposition when he sought to sideline the WTO as a functioning institution. There was little push back in US political circles when in 2018, he applied 25 percent duties to imports of steel and ten percent tariffs on aluminum. Likewise, when the United States began blocking appointments to the WTO's Appellate Body the following year, few voices were raised in opposition.

As the second tier of the once fabled dispute settlement system fell by the wayside, dispute resolution at the WTO was rendered largely dysfunctional. The Biden administration continued to block appointments and, afraid of its own shadow on the question of trade, largely treated the WTO with disdain. Washington continues to block these appointments, and the Appellate Body is no more.

**Dispute resolution at the WTO was rendered largely dysfunctional**

The cavalcade of US negativity on the WTO raised questions as to whether the United States might leave the organization and what that could mean for the country and for the system itself.

Some members of the Trump administration now seem to recognize the benefits that flow to the United States from its WTO membership. US service exporters and those who receive royalties and licensing fees for their intellectual property understand that the WTO system underpins their success in international markets. A US withdrawal would also leave the WTO playing field wide open for China – a strategic blunder than even an isolationist White House is unlikely to commit.

There is no legal channel through which the United States could be expelled from the WTO, and it seems unlikely that Washington would choose to renounce its membership. Still, the mere fact that the question has been seriously considered is profoundly disquieting for the WTO.

## Bretton Woods

The rationale behind the Bretton Woods Conference was and remains irrefutable: to deter the sort of nationalist policies that helped give rise to the Second World War. The competitive currency devaluations, rising trade barriers, and discriminatory preferences implemented in the 1920s and 1930s not only failed to roll back the Great Depression, they fostered a downward spiral of trade hostilities that put the world on a war time footing.

The more than 700 delegates who gathered in New Hampshire were not trade experts. Most were representatives of their nations' treasuries who sought to create a fund to assist countries burdened by balance of payment difficulties, and a bank to fund the reconstruction of Europe and assist in the development of poorer countries. On this front, the delegates succeeded, and the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund were born.

### **The specifics of trade policy were not directly addressed during Bretton Woods**

The specifics of trade policy were not directly addressed during the three-week meeting, yet trade issues were never far from sight.

The delegates agreed that one of the goals of the newly created International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (IBRD) was "To promote the long-range balanced growth of international trade."<sup>2</sup>

For the embryonic International Monetary Fund, the role was "to avoid competitive exchange depreciation" and "to assist ... in the elimination of foreign exchange restrictions which hamper the growth of world trade."<sup>3</sup>

What was agreed for finance and development did not suffice for charting a global roadmap for trade, so negotiators agreed to further talks to "reduce obstacles to and restrictions upon international trade, eliminate unfair trade practices, promote mutually advantageous commercial relations, and otherwise facilitate the expansion and balanced growth of international trade and promote the stability of international economic relations."<sup>4</sup>

These objectives were very much in line with what President Franklin D. Roosevelt and Prime Minister Winston Churchill had agreed in their August 1941 joint declaration known as the Atlantic Charter. The two leaders agreed "to further the enjoyment all states, great or small, victor or vanquished, of access, on equal terms, to the trade and to the raw materials of the world which are needed for their economic prosperity."<sup>5</sup>

## Early Signs of Trouble

The US-UK alliance was instrumental to the allies' victory in the Second World War, but frictions inevitably arose including in the planning and execution of Bretton Woods. One major point of friction was US opposition to Britain's system of preferential tariffs for members of the British Commonwealth. Roosevelt, a staunch opponent of colonialism, wanted an end to the Commonwealth preferential tariffs. Britain and other members of the Commonwealth naturally disagreed. As an incentive to give up the preference system, Washington agreed to put on the table the tariffs encompassed in the notorious Smoot-Hawley tariff act of 1930.<sup>6</sup>

Negotiators met in Geneva in 1947 to add technical details to the broad-brush framework agreed in Bretton Woods. Having laid the groundwork for a global trade compact, the 53 members of the United Nations Conference on Trade and Employment – including Iran, Lebanon, Syria and Iraq which never joined the GATT or the WTO – embarked for Havana to finish the negotiations. Four months later, negotiators agreed to establish the International Trade Organization and to sign the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade, which remains the central template for governing world trade to this day.<sup>7</sup>

The Havana charter included sections on labor standards, foreign investment – both private and public – on maintaining domestic employment and safeguards against inflation and deflation. None of these measures were ever adopted within the multilateral trading system.<sup>8</sup>

In fact, the ITO never saw the light of day. The GATT was signed by 23 governments, but for the United States the International Trade Organization was a bridge too far. US Senators concerned that such an organization might impinge on American sovereignty made it clear they had the votes to block ratification. So, in 1950 President Harry Truman decided against sending the agreement to Capitol Hill for ratification.

The GATT, on the other hand, came into force and what a strange animal it was! It was never formally declared an organization. Those who agreed to its terms were not members but “contracting parties.” It was a treaty with a headquarters, a secretariat and 23 member governments.

## The GATT

Although, or perhaps because the GATT was so obscure, it proved to be an unexpected success. From 1948, when the organization first opened, until 1995, when it was replaced by the WTO, GATT negotiators concluded eight “rounds” of broad and extensive trade negotiations.

**The GATT remains the central template for governing world trade to this day**

**National treatment and the principle of Most Favored Nation as key principles**

The first of these rounds, in Havana, involved 23 countries and resulted in the reduction of 45,000 tariffs covering about 20 percent of global trade. Over the eight trade rounds, average industrial tariffs fell from roughly 40 percent to less than four percent. Between 1948 and 1997, trade in goods grew by 14 times. As a percentage of overall economic activity trade growth surged. In 1950, trade was equivalent to seven percent of global output, by 1997 trade had grown to 23 percent of world GDP. Today, world trade volume is roughly 43 times the 1950 level.<sup>9</sup>

At that time, the key principles of GATT were universally hailed, particularly the twin pillars of national treatment and the principle of Most Favored Nation (MFN) – which ensured that traders faced no discrimination vis-à-vis domestic companies or enterprises from third countries.<sup>10</sup>

The last of these rounds, known as the Uruguay Round, was the most far-reaching. For the first time trade in services, agriculture and textiles were seriously negotiated. Rules covering trade-related investment measures and protection of intellectual property were also introduced. The agreement also gave birth to the World Trade Organization which opened its doors in 1995.

There were 128 countries participating in those negotiations, but in reality, the talks were driven by a handful of countries. Brazil and India were the most influential developing countries, actively participating in the negotiations and particularly those that involved agriculture (Brazil) and textiles (India). But the real engine of the Uruguay Round was the “Quad” group of countries, the United States, the European Economic Community (later the European Union), Japan and Canada. Were those four to agree, the chances of an overall agreement were high.

## **A Mixed Reception**

When the Uruguay Round deal was reached in Geneva in 1993, it met with jubilation in trade circles. Outside those circles scarcely anyone noticed. Unlike future ministerial level WTO meetings, there was little commotion. One protestor, from Greenpeace, chained himself to the gates of GATT’s headquarters. That was it.

**Remarkable achievement in poverty reduction thanks to the growth of trade.**

That was soon to change. In 1995, 39.2 percent of the global population lived in poverty and by 2024 that figure had fallen to 10.3 percent. Many economists attributed this remarkable achievement to the growth of trade.<sup>11</sup>

But this mattered little to the opponents of the multilateral trading system. The hostility quickly mushroomed. Many governments in the developing world – and activists in rich countries – believed that the system widened income inequality and was rigged in favor of US and European multinational companies.

## The WTO Years

In 1998, the WTO Director General, Italian Renato Ruggiero, assembled an all-star cast of world leaders in Geneva, including Nelson Mandela, Bill Clinton, Fidel Castro and Tony Blair. The occasion was the WTO's second Ministerial Conference, and the theme was to be a celebration of 50 years of the multilateral trading system. But anyone expecting that these leaders would deliver a full-blown endorsement of the WTO would have been disappointed. US President Clinton said WTO Members needed to be more transparent and to do more to promote environmental and labor standards.<sup>12</sup>

During the negotiations that established the WTO, President Mandela said "developing countries were not able to ensure that the rules accommodated their realities."<sup>13</sup>

Deep divisions among the WTO member governments over those issues – labor standards, environment and development – ensured that the outcome of the third ministerial conference held a year later in Seattle was a dismal failure. Discord over these issues haunts the organization to this day.

The Seattle meeting profoundly changed the global discussion on trade. It also underscored the folly of creating a high-profile organization to oversee global trade rules without at first building a solid political foundation to support the organization and its objectives. Seattle exposed the deep cracks in the global trading system and political support for trade went into steep decline. This was particularly true in the United States, where it is now difficult to find a pro-trade politician.

## WTO Today

When it is working well, the WTO performs many vital functions – negotiating new rules, resolving disputes, providing a forum in which members can exchange information, and offering technical assistance to developing countries to help them implement WTO rules.

But few would suggest today that the WTO works well. The WTO's negotiating and dispute settlement functions are crippled, and the organization struggles to be relevant. The number of multilateral agreements struck at the WTO over a period of 30 years can be counted on one hand. Many governments, frustrated by the slow pace of activity at the WTO, now favor bilateral or plurilateral initiatives.

The problems which confront the WTO are largely of the members' own making. The decision-making is rigid and easily undermined by governments which prefer gridlock and endless rhetoric to problem-solving. The dispute settlement system limps along, but with nobody to hear appeals, rulings are scorned by governments that appeal "into the void"

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and thereby putting the dispute in permanent limbo. Even standard operating procedures are impeded by a persistent unwillingness of governments to notify the organization of any changes to its policies. As a result, information on subsidies, industrial policy or non-tariff barriers is woefully inadequate which further paralyzes key WTO functions.

Principles like non-discrimination, organization-wide participation and transparency are applied in such a way as to stymie negotiations, dispute resolution, and even the procedures for organizing and conducting meetings.

### **Growing opposition to applying special and differential treatment to China and India**

The dispute settlement system crumbled because the Appellate Body was too often guilty of overreaching its mandate and inserting its jurisprudence into decisions. But the real reason for the WTO's troubles is its largely impotent negotiating function. Hamstrung by a decision-making process which mandates that consensus of all 166 members is needed for organization-wide agreements, multilateral deals are rarely struck.

## **The Need for Reform**

Everyone agrees reform is needed but there is no consensus on what that means. Many developing countries, for instance, would like broader derogations from existing rules. Developed countries, on the other hand, favor abolishing universal application of the "special and differential treatment" provisions which extend flexibilities to developing countries. These flexibilities include longer transition periods for implementing agreements and more leeway to hand out trade-distorting subsidies for farmers and manufacturers. No one opposes granting these flexibilities to the Least Developed Countries, but there is significant and growing opposition to applying such treatment to China and India.

There is strong support for reforming the dispute settlement system with most countries favoring a return to a two-tiered system with the option to appeal. But the United States intractably resists the idea fearing that re-establishing an appeal process, even in a new configuration, would once again lead to judicial overreach.

Members have discreetly scaled back expectations for the 14<sup>th</sup> Ministerial Conference (MC14) in Yaoundé, Cameroon. No one foresees a breakthrough in dispute settlement, agriculture, decision-making, new rules for industrial policy, or greater clarity on the use of the national security exception.

Instead, the idea is to use the conference to identify where progress can be made *after* the Ministerial Conference. At the July meeting of the WTO's General Council, *Petter Ølberg, the Norwegian ambassador charged with overseeing the negotiations on reform, stated bluntly: "Our goal is not to solve every issue now. It's to identify where Ministers can add the guidance needed to move forward decisively after MC14."*



Even this objective seems overly optimistic. For as long as Donald Trump – an ardent skeptic of multilateralism – remains in the White House, there will be little progress on reform or anything else in the WTO. Everyone knows this. Few say it out loud.

## Reports of Demise May Be Premature

As difficult as recent years have been for the WTO, the organization is not on the verge of collapse. US actions – and those of China, India and South Africa – have wounded the organization, but none of the 166 Member governments want to see its demise.

Trump's arrival for a second term sparked panic in the corridors of Geneva. And since returning to the White House again in January, the Trump Administration has regularly derided the WTO. White House Counselor Peter Navarro argued that MFN led to "a rigged system."<sup>14</sup>

In September 2025, US Trade Representative Jamieson Greer proclaimed that global trade rules would no longer tie Washington's hands on trade policy. Then, for good measure, he took a swipe at the organization. "Today, when people ask me about the WTO, I tell them: we have them right where we want them."<sup>15</sup>

**USTR proclaimed that global trade rules would no longer tie Washington's hands**

At first, diplomats responded to such statements with alarm. But now many diplomats are reassessing their views, adopting a pragmatic approach to the aggressive occupant of 1600 Pennsylvania Ave. These diplomats point out that the Armageddon forecasts of January have not come to pass and that Trump officials may be recalibrating their approach to the WTO. They point out that the fierce response from markets, consumers and some key trade partners have forced Trump to reconfigure the "Liberation Day" across the board tariffs he announced in April 2025.

The WTO funding imbroglio is another example of the United States reassessing its approach. In August, the White House included the WTO on a list of organizations to be defunded via a rarely invoked "pocket rescission" clawing back roughly five US billion dollars allocated by Congress to international organizations, including the WTO. The rationale was that spending on multilateralism "violates the President's America First priorities."<sup>16</sup> The WTO was accused of "aiding and abetting global trade cheating by the Chinese Communist party."<sup>17</sup>

The United States had been tardy in paying its dues before, but this action seemed to indicate a permanent cessation of US funding commitments. WTO spending is modest with a 2025 budget of 204.9 million Swiss francs (219 million euros).<sup>18</sup> The United States is the largest contributor to the WTO budget, but its 2025 contribution of CHF 23.1 million, is a rounding error for a country with an expected federal budget of 7.1 trillion US dollars.<sup>19</sup>

The White House announcement shocked the WTO, which led to the suspension of many activities and sent the organization's leadership scrambling to fill budgetary gaps. "Administrative measures", a cascading series of sanctions which limit the participation of non-paying WTO members, were applied to the United States in March.

Then an interesting thing happened: a week after posting the defunding notice, the White House website page was updated and the reference to the WTO cuts was deleted. Quietly, the United States transferred nearly 26 million US dollars to WTO headquarters. Accounts differ on what happened, but it seems the Office of Management and Budget unilaterally rescinded the funding without consulting the relevant agencies including USTR. When this was discovered, affected agencies weighed in sharply and the rescission was lifted.

**Indications that the US is seeking to engage more constructively with the WTO**

Rhetoric aside, other important actions indicate that the Trump Administration is seeking to engage more constructively with the WTO. The newly appointed WTO Deputy Director-General, Jennifer "DJ" Nordquist, is highly respected for her work at the World Bank and at the Brookings Institution. During her first months in the job, she has received high marks from the Geneva trade community.

The appointment of Joseph Barloon as US ambassador to the WTO likewise demonstrated that Washington was serious about its dealings with the organization. Mr. Barloon is an experienced trade lawyer, who, in the first Trump Administration, served as General Counsel at USTR under Robert Lighthizer. Geneva diplomats acknowledge that his perspective on multilateralism does not match their own, but they are reassured by Mr. Barloon's technical expertise.

At last month's General Council meeting Mr. Barloon laid out the US position on WTO reform. While some members were startled by his attack on MFN and on the WTO Secretariat, much of what he raised on plurilaterals, addressing industrial overcapacity, improving transparency and scaling back concessions extended to some developing countries was considered thoughtful. Most of all, there was appreciation of the fact that Washington was engaged in the conversation.

The US has also shown acute interest in preserving the 1998 agreement prohibiting the application of tariffs on electronic commerce transmissions. Unless agreement among the members can be reached by ministers in March, the moratorium will expire, opening the door for a slew of charges on digital trade. The Trump Administration, which has close relationships with many tech titans, has put pressure on trading partners to agree to an extension of the moratorium. Recent trade deals with Indonesia, Malaysia and Cambodia all contain provisions in which governments commit their support to continue the moratorium.<sup>20</sup>

In terms of the broader e-commerce agreement, the United States is unlikely to support a deal because it believes the current negotiating text does not address the country's national security concerns. Yet officials say they will not block others from going forward, as India and South Africa have tried to do. Likewise, Washington will not join but does not oppose a draft agreement aimed at facilitating investment in developing countries.

## **Clear Benefit for US Services Producers**

Part of the Trump Administration's more pragmatic approach to the WTO stems from a recognition that US companies greatly benefit from WTO agreements. Aided by the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS), US services exporters including tech companies, financial institutions, educators and hospitality providers exported 1.1 trillion US dollars in services, by far the most in the world. The US trade surplus in services is 293.4 billion US dollars. Bolstered by the Trade Related Intellectual Property agreement, in 2024 US companies raked in over 144 billion US dollars in royalties and licensing fees; far more than those received in any other country.<sup>21</sup>

**US companies greatly benefit from WTO agreements.**

Then there is the looming threat of China-controlled WTO. All of this portends an outcome in which the US holds the WTO at arm's length, but keeps an eye on developments and participates when it likes. The most likely result of the US ambivalence toward the WTO is that members will muddle through as best they can and hope that the next US president brings a more positive attitude toward the organization and trade more generally.

## **If Not the WTO, Then What?**

Importantly, other WTO members have rejected the US example and renewed their commitment to WTO rules. Each member may have a bespoke trading relationship with the United States, but in terms of trade with others, tariff schedules largely remain as they were.

European and Asian officials may be relieved by the less hostile US stance towards the WTO but they are hedging their bets nonetheless – diversifying their trading partners and seeking new economic partnerships.

Perhaps the most interesting courtship involves the EU and the twelve-member Comprehensive and Progressive Trans-Pacific Partnership. The EU-CPTPP initiative advanced in November when trade ministers from the 39 countries met in Melbourne, Australia for their “inaugural” CPTPP-EU Trade and Investment Dialogue.

**The most interesting courtship involves the EU and the CPTPP**

Ministers agreed to uphold existing trade commitments – including commitments taken at the WTO – and to support the rules-based system. They pledged to work together on WTO reform and emphasized their support for plurilateral WTO initiatives, including those on electronic commerce and Investment Facilitation for Development. They also said they would work with all WTO Members to achieve “positive outcomes” at the ministerial conference in March. There are strong indications that CPTPP and EU trade ministers will meet in Yaoundé and may issue a statement on what the WTO should do next.<sup>22</sup>

Another plurilateral initiative that is taking shape is the 14-member Future Investment and Trade Partnership launched in September 2025 by a group of small trade dependent economies. Objectives of the FIT partnership include facilitating supply chain resilience, supporting foreign direct investment, removing non-tariff barriers and unnecessary red tape at borders and the integration of trade technologies. The FIT partnership does not currently involve negotiating tariffs, nor are the rules binding. But this could change.<sup>23</sup>

Nobody is suggesting that these arrangements might supersede the WTO. But they may provide a bit of stability in trading relationships at a time when such steadiness is sorely lacking.

## A US Departure?

There is, of course, one other alternative: a US departure from the WTO. As mentioned earlier, the US is unlikely to initiate such a step though there are those in the Trump Administration – including the president himself – who have previously expressed a desire to do so.

Still, some trade experts believe such a divorce would be in the best interests of the wider membership and perhaps the United States as well. Two former Members of the WTO Secretariat, Henrik Horn, a professor of international economics at the Stockholm-based Research Institute for Industrial Economics and Petros Mavroidis, a law professor at Columbia Law School, accept that the current WTO rules do not provide the means for other members to expel the United States.

### **A US departure is unlikely to happen**

In light of this, the two academics conclude: “The only existing option would be for the US to leave permanently and reapply when it so desires.”<sup>24</sup> This is unlikely to happen. Even the Trump Administration appears to understand that to leave the WTO would put the United States at a profound commercial disadvantage.

## Conclusion

There is no denying that a US departure from the WTO would be a nasty shock to the organization. But leaving the WTO would also create immense problems for the United States. The chaos and uncertainty unleashed by President Trump's erratic trade policies would be compounded by severing the ties that enable US companies to participate in overseas markets with predictability and certainty. US services companies, and innovators would lose the protection afforded to them under WTO rules.

This would be ironic given that American entrepreneurs benefit more from this protection than those from any other country. Just ask the Silicon Valley tech companies who have traditionally been among the WTO and multilateral trading system's most steadfast advocates.

This realization seems to have dawned on Washington, which could explain its decision to pay its WTO dues, to send a qualified trade expert to Geneva as ambassador, and to participate in those areas of WTO activity it believes suit it best.

But the status quo is not really an option either. Spinning its wheels as it has for so long has undermined confidence in the WTO not only in the United States, but across the globe. Reforming the organization is unquestionably the best way forward.

But for this to occur there will need to be leadership. But from whom? China? The world's second largest economy clearly has the clout to push for its objectives, but few WTO members see the Chinese model as one they wish to replicate. Moreover, most members are wary of Beijing's zero-sum approach to trade.

The European Union? The EU brings noteworthy bona fides to the party. No other member has been as consistently supportive of the multilateral trading system. Its immense size and broad array of interests mean Brussels has a stake in the WTO across the board. But the EU is an unwieldy beast beset with complex internal challenges and burdened by its own cumbersome decision-making process.

The Director-General is, by tradition and necessity, a neutral arbiter who can suggest and guide. But when it comes to matters of vast political consequence, the DG is constrained in what actions it can take, particularly if there are stark differences among the members. The fact that the current DG, Ngozi Okonjo Iweala, does not have Washington's confidence, further complicates matters.

Which leaves the United States. At present, expecting bold action from a government led by a transactional president who cares little for the nitty-gritty of trade policy and who harbors deep suspicions about multilateralism would be a poor bet.

**For reforming the WTO, there will need to be leadership**

But what of US policy post-Trump? The president's chaotic, antagonistic and arbitrary trade policies are increasingly unpopular. Many voters blame the tariffs for higher food and energy prices and there is unease about how they have alienated traditional US allies. A recent Pew poll showed that 61 percent of voters disapprove, while a poll from Yale University indicated that 71 percent of chief executives believe the tariffs have compromised their businesses.<sup>25</sup>

The Democrats have shown little affection for trade or the WTO. But change could be afoot. In three separate votes in the Senate this autumn, a majority of senators voted to strike down tariffs against Brazil, Mexico and Canada and against the tariffs unveiled on "Liberation Day." Given that the House of Representatives had previously cast a blanket vote prohibiting anti-tariff legislation from coming to the floor, these Senate votes went nowhere. But they did send a signal. It is instructive to see so many prominent Democrats speaking so critically about the application of tariffs. Would this trend hold if Democrats take the White House and the Congress in the coming years?

**Predicting US trade policy in the coming years is a risky proposition.**

Predicting how US trade policy will evolve in the coming years is a risky proposition. Lurching into unilateralism is nothing new for the United States and it is unclear whether this most recent Trump-inspired bout is an aberration or the start of a long-term trend.

Confronted with what real protectionism looks like, might the people of the United States come to appreciate the rewards that trade, and trade rules, deliver for the country? It is too early to say. But today's US trade policy is driven almost exclusively by one man. After he has gone, things will no doubt be different. US trade relations with allies and perhaps the WTO are likely to improve – could they get much worse? But no one should expect a return to the heyday of multilateralism.

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