

# THE WASHINGTON POST

## Opinion: Trump's reckless tariffs remain intact. Biden's failure to reverse them has real consequences.

Opinion by Stan Anderson  
and  
William N. Walker

May 24, 2021 at 8:00 a.m. EDT

*Stan Anderson is a former White House and State Department official for Richard M. Nixon and Gerald Ford. William N. Walker was the deputy special trade representative in Geneva from 1975 to 1977.*

President Biden's first four months in office have seen an abrupt reversal in a number of his predecessor's policies, but Donald Trump's costly record of reckless tariffs remains intact. The administration is missing a real opportunity to make needed changes in U.S. trade policy.

This unexpected failure to act has very real consequences — American consumers still [remain burdened](#) with higher prices caused by Trump's lingering tariffs; American exporters [continue to suffer](#) from retaliatory measures by nations overseas; and American trading partners don't yet see a reason to restore more accommodating terms with the United States.

And we can't seem to wrangle an invitation to join the new Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership.

Biden and his lieutenants have trumpeted their commitment to reviving a rules-based global order based on negotiated commitments and standards — a clear and unambiguous rejection of Trump's unilateralist approach to most of the world's problems. But they so far haven't taken any steps to apply those standards in the international trade sector.

For example, the administration has left intact tariffs on steel and aluminum that Trump imposed when he made a manifestly false finding that exports to the United States from Canada and the European Union — our strongest allies in the world — constituted a [threat to our national security](#).

Similarly, the administration has left intact the [tariffs Trump imposed](#) on thousands of imported aircraft parts, batteries and flat screen TVs from China — an action widely

denounced as an extralegal effort to punish China for internal trade practices that the United States objected to and couldn't get China to change.

Previously, the United States would lead the way in negotiating under established trading rules and referring trade disputes to the World Trade Organization (WTO), where Washington has historically enjoyed a high rate of success. But Trump, disdainful of multilateral organizations, trashed the WTO's reputation and sabotaged its operations so it [could not take new cases](#) anyway. The WTO is crippled today and will remain so until the United States resumes a leadership role.

When asked recently about removing these extralegal tariffs, new U.S. Trade Representative Katherine Tai demurred, saying they offer her "[leverage](#)." We get that — we've used leverage in trade deals ourselves. But to what end? Should the United States be asking trading partners to make new concessions as the price of removing Trump's bogus tariffs?

It's also worrisome that she has [threatened punitive tariffs](#) on Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development countries over disagreements about taxing digital transactions. Placing new unilateral tariffs on U.S. trading partners because of disagreements over tax policy doesn't comport with either law or commonly accepted trade practices.

The administration needs to take steps to repair U.S. trade policy — and do it now. If we hope to engage our trade partners in joint efforts to restrain China and to help increase rates of economic growth in liberal democracies, we need to start by restoring integrity to our own trade practices.

The administration should issue a new finding under Section 232 stating what everyone has known all along: that imports of steel and aluminum do not represent a national security threat to the United States. When that finding takes effect, authority for the tariffs will expire and that bogus Trump-era program will terminate. It should also vacate the groundless tariffs being levied on top of spiraling Canadian [lumber prices](#) that are punishing U.S. home builders and home buyers. Similarly, the United States can take immediate steps to revive and revitalize the trade dispute resolution authority of the WTO.

A strong case can also be made for immediate steps to cancel the tariffs the Trump administration imposed upon China — and which quite predictably triggered retaliatory measures against U.S. exporters. Both actions were taken unilaterally in defiance of international norms and severely disrupted trade, hurting consumers and companies in both countries. Besides, they have demonstrably failed to resolve the underlying commercial disagreements.

China hawks will criticize any loosening in current tariffs. And we're mindful that the United States and China are facing off against one another on a host of important issues that are arguably linked to one another. But the current tariffs on thousands of different items are costing U.S. consumers billions in unnecessary higher prices. What purpose is

served by extending them? Why not stop punishing ourselves by ending Trump's failed initiative and return to accepted norms of international behavior where we can attract allies and mount a concerted multilateral effort to compel better Chinese behavior?

Returning U.S. trade policy to traditional norms doesn't mean restoring the mantra of free trade, but reversing Trump's unilateral policy errors will provide a more workable foundation to promote the kind of jobs-promoting fair trade that the administration favors. Moreover, all of this can be accomplished without involving Congress.

Remember this, too: Removing bogus tariffs also means lower import costs and a timely hedge against rising prices and inflation. Why is the administration waiting to act?

\