CANDIDATE: Jurnal Sains Politik Vol.2 No.1 ; Hal 68 - 84
Website : https://journal.uinsgd.ac.id/index.php/candidate/
ISSN : **3032-7997**

THE UNITED STATES-CHINA TRADE DISPUTE: A MERCANTILIST PERSPECTIVE ON TARIFF POLICY AND GLOBAL ECONOMIC IMPLICATIONS

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Received: Mei 20, 2024, Revised : 12 June 2024, Approved : 24 June 2024

ABSTRACT

This study explores the dynamics and process of the trade dispute between the United States (US) and China from 2018 to 2020. The primary focus is on the implementation of import tariffs by the US, aimed at addressing the trade deficit, reducing imports, and increasing exports. US trade policy was influenced by economic and political motives, with the main goal of maintaining US economic dominance and pressuring China to reform its trade practices. This study employs a descriptive qualitative methodology based on post-positivist philosophy, utilizing secondary data from literature reviews and internet sources. The findings indicate that the import tariffs successfully reduced imports and increased US exports in 2020, while protecting domestic industries and the agricultural sector from the retaliatory tariffs imposed by China. This policy reflects a mercantilist approach, emphasizing the protection of domestic industries and the balancing of the trade deficit. The trade dispute has significant impacts on the global economy and underscores the importance of constructive dialogue for conflict resolution. This study suggests the need for a deeper analysis of the dispute's impact on the global economy and society. The conflict has broad implications for the global economy, increasing the cost of goods, and affecting monetary and fiscal policies in both countries. Resolving this dispute is crucial for global economic and political stability, requiring constructive dialogue and close international cooperation.

Keywords: *Trade Dispute, Import Tariffs, Global Economy, Mercantilism, China, United States*

INTRODUCTION

The trade dispute between the United States and China has been one of the most dominant global economic events in recent years. As the world's two largest economies, the United States and China found themselves locked in escalating tensions centered around trade imbalances, intellectual property rights, and competing global ambitions. Under the leadership of President Donald Trump in 2018, the United States took assertive action by imposing tariffs on a wide range of Chinese imports. This policy aimed to rebalance trade relations and pressure China into reforming its trading practices. A central element of this dispute is the implementation of "import tariffs" (Tawarika, 2023).

This study focuses on the U.S. policy response to the trade deficit with China, specifically the efforts to reduce imports and increase exports between 2018 and 2020. Findings indicate that U.S. trade policy towards China was driven by both economic and political motives. However, political objectives—namely the maintenance of American global dominance—played a more significant role in shaping these policies amidst China's rising economic power and trade surplus. The U.S. trade balance improved in 2020, marked by a decline in imports and an increase in exports. Government interventions, including tariffs, sought to curtail imports, protect domestic industries, and enhance productivity. Additionally, export subsidies were deployed to shield American farmers from retaliatory tariffs and ensure the continuity and profitability of agricultural exports (Andina, 2019).

While economic factors underpinned U.S. trade policy, political considerations were deeply intertwined. It is difficult to disentangle which factor was more influential, yet political motivations were prominently articulated. U.S. officials, including President Trump, publicly emphasized that trade policy aimed to protect American jobs and sustain U.S. global hegemony. Tariffs were employed as leverage to compel China into making concessions during trade negotiations. Heightened geopolitical tensions between the United States and China further entrenched the trade dispute as a critical dimension of their broader rivalry (Khaldun, 2023).

This research analyzes the dynamics and processes of the 2018 U.S.-China trade dispute, paying particular attention to its economic and political consequences at the global level. It further examines the structured dialogue initiatives undertaken to resolve the conflict. However, existing studies on the trade dispute often fall short of providing in-depth analysis of the broader socio-economic impacts. For instance, there remains limited exploration into how the dispute unfolded over time and how it affected various societal groups worldwide (Aslam, 2019).

Resolving the U.S.-China trade dispute is crucial given its profound implications for the global economy, international politics, and cooperation. The tariffs imposed during the conflict elevated production costs in China, disrupted manufacturing and trade flows, and influenced investment and growth in the United States. More broadly, the dispute represents a facet of a larger trade war, impacting economic and political policymaking worldwide. It highlights the necessity for international cooperation in addressing trade issues to foster global trade and investment. The tariffs also influenced U.S. monetary and fiscal policies and had a significant impact on China's economic strategies, shaping political developments not only in the two countries but also globally (Rudi Purwono, Unggul Heriqbaldi, Miguel Angel Esquivias, and M. Khoerul Mubin, 2021).

Within this context, this study offers a more comprehensive examination of the U.S.-China trade conflict, focusing specifically on the 2018 U.S. tariff measures. It traces the origins of the dispute, explores its evolving dynamics, assesses its national and international economic and political consequences, and analyzes the structured dialogue initiatives aimed at conflict resolution.

The theoretical framework adopted is mercantilism, an economic doctrine that flourished between the 16th and 18th centuries, emphasizing the accumulation of national wealth through a favorable balance of trade. At its core, mercantilism advocates for maximizing exports while minimizing imports to accumulate precious metals and strengthen domestic industries. Its key features include the imposition of high tariffs to shield domestic production, the accumulation of gold and silver as indicators of national wealth, and colonial expansion to secure resources and markets for domestic goods (Muh. Fadly Syam, 2021).

Although mercantilism laid early foundations for modern economic systems, it has been criticized for its protectionist tendencies and the potential long-term inhibition of economic growth and free trade. Nonetheless, its principles remain relevant in contemporary contexts. The 2018 U.S. tariffs on Chinese goods can be interpreted through a mercantilist lens, representing an effort by the Trump administration to reduce the trade deficit, protect American industries, and promote domestic production and exports (Jhamtani, 2005).

In the case of the U.S.-China dispute, the tariffs targeted a broad range of Chinese goods, including electronics, textiles, and machinery—sectors perceived as threats to American industry. These measures aimed to make Chinese products less competitive in the U.S. market by raising their prices for American consumers (Hady, 2001). From a mercantilist perspective, tariffs serve as a means to safeguard domestic industries and achieve trade surpluses. They also function as tools to pressure China into making concessions on key issues such as intellectual property rights and market access. Thus, the U.S. trade strategy during the Trump administration reflects a broader shift toward protectionism, prioritizing domestic economic interests and asserting economic sovereignty (Sood, 2011).

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a descriptive qualitative research methodology, grounded in a post-positivist philosophical framework. Such an approach is typically applied in studies conducted under natural and objective conditions, wherein the researcher serves as the primary research instrument. Data collection was carried out through a literature review and internet-based research. The information utilized in this study consists of secondary data, sourced from online materials, previous research publications, and news articles. This data was essential to answer the research questions and to achieve the study's objectives.

The method was employed to compile and present various theoretical perspectives relevant to the research problem, thereby serving as a foundational reference for the presentation of research findings. The literature review specifically sought out theoretical sources that were directly applicable to the cases and issues identified in the study (Sugiyono, 2019).

RESULT AND DISCUSSIONS

The Origins of the U.S.-China Trade War

To understand the complexities of the 2018 trade dispute between the United States and China, it is essential to assess the background and historical evolution of their economic relations. The roots of the conflict can be traced back to China's rapid economic growth during the late 20th and early 21st centuries, which propelled China to become a major player in the global economy. With this growth, China began to penetrate global markets—including that of the United States—with competitively priced goods. Over time, the United States increasingly felt pressured by China's economic expansion and the growing trade volume between the two countries.

Throughout the late 20th century, U.S.-China economic relations expanded at an astonishing pace. China, employing an export-driven economic model, flooded American markets with inexpensive goods ranging from toys to electronics. While this development allowed American consumers access to lower-cost products, it simultaneously placed intense competitive pressure on

U.S. industries. Many American factories faced severe challenges, leading to widespread closures and the offshoring of manufacturing operations, often to China, in a bid to remain competitive (Sari et al., 2023).

However, this burgeoning trade also created significant imbalances. Over time, the United States developed a substantial trade deficit with China, importing far more goods than it exported. This imbalance became a source of growing tension, as many American policymakers and officials argued that China was unfairly benefiting from the trade relationship. Accusations were made that China manipulated its currency, heavily subsidized its exporters, and engaged in unfair trade practices detrimental to foreign competitors.

Another critical concern revolved around intellectual property rights. Numerous American companies complained about widespread technology theft and unauthorized replication of innovations within China. Despite China's efforts to reform its intellectual property laws and enforcement mechanisms, many in the U.S. believed these measures were insufficient.

Entering the 2010s, tensions between the United States and China intensified. With the election of President Donald Trump in 2016, the U.S. approach to China shifted dramatically. Trump, who had frequently criticized China's trade practices during his campaign, advocated for a more confrontational stance. He believed that imposing tariffs on Chinese goods would compel China to renegotiate trade terms more favorable to the United States.

In 2018, the Trump administration implemented a series of tariffs on a broad range of Chinese imports, targeting goods worth billions of dollars. The stated aim was to protect U.S. domestic industries and reduce the trade deficit. China, in turn, retaliated by imposing its own tariffs on American imports, triggering an intense tariff war between the two largest economies in the world.

This tariff war extended beyond mere trade disputes; it symbolized a broader strategic competition for global dominance. The United States and

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China held differing visions of how the global economy should be organized, each seeking to secure a dominant position on the world stage (Barus et al., 2022).

To fully comprehend the 2018 U.S.-China trade conflict, it is crucial to consider the preceding decades of complex, interdependent economic relations. The tensions of 2018 were the culmination of a variety of long-standing factors. A historical perspective offers valuable insights into the motivations behind the United States' decision to impose tariffs, China's retaliatory measures, and the broader implications for the global economy.

During the late 20th century, the United States transitioned from a manufacturing-based economy to a service-based economy. Simultaneously, China, moving from a centrally planned to a market-oriented economy, aggressively expanded its manufacturing capabilities. China's export-focused strategy enabled it to capitalize on opportunities abandoned by the U.S. and other Western economies in the manufacturing sector, accelerating its rise as a major global economic power.

This shift in global economic gravity from West to East was further fueled by the decisions of numerous multinational corporations to relocate manufacturing operations to China, attracted by low labor costs and more lenient regulatory environments. While this relocation allowed consumers in the U.S. and Europe access to cheaper goods, it also resulted in significant job losses in traditional American industrial regions, particularly in the so-called "Rust Belt."

During this period, China also became a critical node in global supply chains. With its efficient and low-cost production capacity, China entrenched itself as a pivotal component of the global manufacturing ecosystem. However, China's rise attracted accusations of unfair trade practices, including currency manipulation, product dumping below cost, unjust subsidies to domestic industries, and violations of intellectual property rights.

Over time, the trade imbalance between the United States and China widened. Despite America's large consumer market and high purchasing power, imports from China vastly outpaced U.S. exports. This growing trade deficit became a major source of contention among U.S. policymakers.

Donald Trump's 2016 presidential victory brought these concerns to the forefront. Promising to "bring jobs back to America" and "rebalance" trade relations with China, Trump and his administration viewed tariffs as a strategic tool to achieve these objectives. The underlying idea was to make Chinese products less attractive to American consumers, encourage domestic production or diversification to other countries, and gain leverage in trade negotiations with China (Parbo, 2021).

However, implementing tariffs carried significant risks. Global supply chains had become so interconnected that disruptions between the two largest economies threatened widespread repercussions. Multinational corporations operating across the United States and China were deeply affected, facing increased costs and operational uncertainties.

China, responding in kind to U.S. tariffs, imposed retaliatory tariffs on American goods, triggering a global ripple effect. Many countries found themselves reassessing their trade policies to mitigate collateral impacts.

In this context, the 2018 U.S.-China trade dispute was not merely a bilateral disagreement over trade deficits. It represented a broader struggle over the future of the global economy—over leadership in technology and innovation, and over the setting of new rules for international trade. Issues such as intellectual property rights, technology transfer, and market access became central to the dispute.

Although tariffs were the most visible instrument of conflict, the underlying issues were far more complex. The trade war reflected a battle between two competing worldviews, two distinct economic models, and two powers striving to redefine the structure of the global economy for decades to come.

The Conflict Process of the U.S.-China Trade War

The trade dispute between the United States (U.S.) and the People's Republic of China in 2018 generated a complex conflict dynamic and posed significant challenges to international trade. The conflict officially commenced on March 22, 2018, when U.S. President Donald Trump announced plans to impose $50 billion in tariffs on Chinese imports (Laksono et al., 2020). The justification for these measures centered on allegations of intellectual property violations by China and unfair trade practices deemed detrimental to the United States.

The initial tariff announcement targeted high-value Chinese products, particularly in high-technology and strategic industries. Items such as electronic components, telecommunications equipment, aircraft, and other manufactured goods were included in the tariff list (Dea, 2019). The policy was designed to exert substantial pressure on the Chinese government to reform its trade practices, perceived as harmful to U.S. economic interests. This announcement marked the beginning of a serious trade conflict between the world's two largest economies, raising alarm among global markets and creating profound economic uncertainty for businesses and consumers worldwide.

China swiftly responded to the U.S. measures. In April 2018, the Chinese government announced 25% tariffs on 106 American products, also valued at $50 billion, including automobiles, aircraft, and agricultural goods. This retaliation intensified the trade tensions. China further threatened additional tariffs on key American exports, such as soybeans and wheat, particularly targeting sectors crucial to the U.S. agricultural economy.

Beyond tariff retaliation, China also launched anti-dumping and anti-subsidy investigations into U.S. sorghum imports, suspended soybean purchases, and ceased buying American cotton (Sitaresmi et al., 2022). These measures significantly impacted U.S. producers and farmers, causing disruptions in global supply chains.

Despite efforts to initiate negotiations, achieving a comprehensive trade agreement proved difficult. High-level meetings between U.S. and Chinese officials repeatedly failed to resolve fundamental disagreements over critical issues such as intellectual property rights, technology transfer, and market access inequities.

The uncertainty surrounding these negotiations reverberated through global markets. Investors and businesses became increasingly risk-averse, leading to a reduction in investment activities. Post-negotiation uncertainties fueled a broader atmosphere of economic instability affecting manufacturing industries, stock markets, and currency exchange rates.

The escalation of the trade conflict triggered global market volatility. Stock markets reacted with significant declines, reflecting investor concerns over escalating trade tensions (Anggraeni, 2019). Exchange rate fluctuations became more pronounced, further affecting international trade flows and foreign direct investment (FDI) globally.

Global supply chains were severely disrupted. Firms engaged in cross-border commerce faced new barriers and increased costs, undermining profitability and operational efficiency. Difficulties in accessing raw materials and components from China delayed production processes and raised manufacturing costs.

The broader economic impacts also trickled down to society. Micro and small businesses reliant on export markets were particularly vulnerable. Consumers, meanwhile, faced rising product prices as a direct consequence of the import tariffs, eroding their purchasing power. Overall, the escalation of the trade conflict created a vicious cycle detrimental to all stakeholders and posed a threat to global economic growth.

As China retaliated against U.S. tariffs, the U.S. government escalated its response. In addition to raising tariffs to 25% on $50 billion worth of Chinese goods, the Trump administration threatened additional tariffs on $200 billion worth of imports (Resitaka Aulia Nurmamurti, Anisa Yuniar Faradilla, Al Imam

Rismanto, Syifa Nur Afifah, & Hamida, 2022). However, U.S. strategy expanded beyond tariff increases. Measures included banning the use of Chinese hardware by U.S. government agencies and imposing new restrictions on Chinese foreign direct investment in key American technology sectors. These actions signaled a broader shift from mere tariff-based confrontation to a strategic containment of China's technological and investment reach.

The disruption of global supply chains created ripple effects. Many multinational corporations, which had relocated production to China to benefit from lower costs, were severely impacted. Tariffs rendered their products less competitive, forcing companies to explore alternative production sites outside China.

Industries such as automotive, technology, and manufacturing suffered significant losses. Firms faced increased uncertainty in forecasting production costs, which affected final consumer prices (Andina, 2019). Business and investor confidence weakened as a result. Small and medium-sized enterprises, integral to global supply networks, bore much of the additional costs and trade barriers, jeopardizing their viability.

Amid the fragmentation of supply chains, businesses were compelled to revise their strategies. Some began diversifying their supply sources beyond China and reassessing the long-term implications of the trade conflict on their operations. The dynamic development of the U.S.-China trade war in 2018 generated widespread uncertainty across global markets, influencing various economic sectors and forcing companies worldwide to adapt their strategies.

In this context, diplomatic efforts and prudent trade policies became crucial in mitigating tensions, restoring market confidence, and ensuring stability in international commerce (Dano, 2021).

The overall dynamics and progression of the 2018 U.S.-China trade conflict illustrate the complexities of international trade relations in an era of globalization. Divergent economic ideologies, political strategies, and strategic visions between the U.S. and China made the conflict exceedingly difficult to resolve. The economic uncertainty created—particularly in financial markets and industrial sectors—became a significant cost borne by nations and societies across the world.

Conflict Resolution in the U.S.-China Trade War

The United States' protectionist measures were driven by strategic objectives, notably the protection of domestic industries. However, it is also evident that such policies sought to diminish China's revenues derived from exports to the U.S. As one of the world's largest economies, American policy decisions often influence other nations, particularly those allied through NATO, thereby exacerbating the economic pressure on China. These actions generated negative consequences for both countries, especially for China, which holds a dominant position in global trade.

Negotiation represents the most viable pathway for both nations to resolve the conflict. In international relations, negotiation is the process through which countries with differing interests seek a middle ground that benefits both parties. There are generally four possible outcomes of negotiation: (1) victory for one side, where only one party benefits; (2) a win-win solution, where both parties achieve equitable outcomes; (3) a zero-sum game, where one side's gain results in the other's loss; and (4) compromise, where each side makes concessions to reach a fair, albeit imperfect, agreement.

In response to the escalating conflict, the United States and China initiated negotiations during the G20 Summit held on November 30, 2018. The outcome was a temporary ceasefire: both countries agreed to suspend new tariff increases for 90 days starting January 1, 2019. China also committed to increasing its purchases of American energy and agricultural products, prompting President Trump to delay additional tariff hikes.

Further negotiations took place in Washington D.C. on May 8, 2019, but ultimately failed. The U.S. accused China of reneging on its commitments to purchase American agricultural goods, leading to the escalation of tariffs from

10% to 25%. Talks resumed during the G20 Summit on June 29, 2019, resulting in renewed dialogue. President Trump agreed not to impose additional tariffs and eased restrictions on Chinese technology giant Huawei. However, China did not immediately fulfill its commitment to expand agricultural purchases.

On August 1, 2019, President Trump announced another round of tariffs: a 10% increase effective September 1, 2019, with the possibility of rising to 25%. China retaliated by halting purchases of U.S. agricultural products, causing the U.S. dollar to weaken. Nevertheless, both countries agreed to resume negotiations in mid-September 2019. China responded by exempting 16 categories of American goods from tariffs, and the U.S. postponed additional tariff increases.

Subsequent discussions led by U.S. officials (Trump, Mnuchin, and Lighthizer) and Chinese Vice Premier Liu He focused on de-escalating tensions, although a full resolution remained elusive.

On October 10–11, 2019, the two sides reached a tentative "phase one" agreement in Washington D.C. Under this agreement, China pledged to purchase $40–50 billion worth of American agricultural products annually and committed to strengthening intellectual property protections. Plans were made to formalize the agreement at the APEC Summit in Santiago, Chile, in November 2019. However, while the U.S. agreed not to proceed with a 15% tariff on $160 billion worth of Chinese imports, it maintained a 25% tariff on $250 billion worth of goods pending further negotiations.

After nearly two years of trade conflict, a "phase one" agreement was officially signed on January 15, 2020. Under its terms, China committed to increasing imports of U.S. goods by $200 billion over 2017 levels, including $32 billion in agricultural products, $78 billion in manufactured goods, $52 billion in energy products, and $38 billion in services.

China also agreed to stricter enforcement against intellectual property theft, making it easier for companies to pursue legal remedies for trade secret

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violations. Nevertheless, the United States maintained a 25% tariff on $360 billion worth of Chinese goods, while China imposed new tariffs on $100 billion worth of American products.

President Trump emphasized that this agreement constituted only the first phase and anticipated further negotiations to address remaining issues, particularly regarding intellectual property rights. Despite these agreements, the trade war persisted. The ongoing retaliatory measures demonstrated that no party could truly "win" in a trade war; all involved parties, including non-combatant countries, suffered collateral economic damages.

Ultimately, trade wars tend to end through negotiation rather than continued escalation. A win-win solution through diplomacy remains the most viable strategy to resolve the conflict and minimize global economic disruption (BBC News Indonesia, 2020).

CONCLUSION

The trade conflict between the United States (U.S.) and China intensified in 2018 under the leadership of President Donald Trump. The U.S. adopted a series of policies, notably the imposition of high tariffs on a wide range of Chinese imports, aimed at reducing the trade deficit and pressuring China to reform its trade practices, particularly in the protection of intellectual property rights.

The U.S. tariff policy towards China was driven by both economic and political factors. The primary objectives were to reduce the trade deficit, protect domestic industries, and boost national productivity. Additionally, a significant political motivation underpinned the policy: the preservation of U.S. global dominance amidst China's rising economic power.

The U.S. imposed tariffs on billions of dollars' worth of Chinese goods, and China responded by implementing its own tariffs on American products. This exchange triggered an intense tariff war, which had broad repercussions on global trade, investment, and economic growth. The conflict fostered widespread uncertainty that constrained corporate investment and expansion in both countries.

U.S. trade policy during this period reflected a mercantilist approach, emphasizing the importance of achieving a trade surplus to accumulate national wealth and protecting domestic industries from foreign competition. However, such protectionist strategies have been criticized for potentially restricting long-term economic growth and undermining free trade.

The trade dispute generated wide-ranging impacts on the global economy, including increased production costs in China, disruptions to manufacturing and trade flows, and effects on monetary and fiscal policies in both the U.S. and China. The conflict also influenced political decision-making across numerous countries, highlighting the critical importance of international cooperation in resolving trade issues and promoting global trade and investment.

Resolving the U.S.-China trade dispute is imperative, given its extensive implications for global economic stability, political relations, and international collaboration. The conflict extends beyond issues of trade imbalance; it is also fundamentally about global leadership and the competition for technological and innovative supremacy. Addressing this conflict effectively requires constructive dialogue and closer international cooperation.

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