Commentary
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America’s “Liberation Day”: New meaning of sanctions in straightforward world

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Summary

America's "Liberation Day" from the rest of the world through massive tariffs symbolically highlights a more straightforward world. This straightforwardness will have many consequences, including a new interpretation of interstate sanctions.

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If there is anything left of stable predictability in the modern world, it is the actions of the U.S. administration under Donald Trump. It sounds like a joke, but a joke with a grain of truth. The predictability of Washington’s actions under the leadership of the MAGA Republicans, of course, lies in the fact that everyone has already accepted the reality where almost every new day brings increasingly shocking news from the U.S. The 47th President of the United States continues to solidify his grip on power and change what seemed like eternal foundations of American politics with an endless hurricane of overwhelming decisions and statements.

Perhaps this reality could be described as “stable unpredictability.” This is exactly what leaders and governments in many corners of the globe were preparing for, according to their own statements, after Trump’s triumphant victory in last year’s presidential election. Although preparing for such an outcome is simply impossible, even on a purely psychological level.

> What's most interesting, however, is that much of the unpredictability of Trump's decisions is not only stable but also not as unpredictable as it might seem after many years of his active political career, both as a head of state and in the context of his electoral campaigns.

On most of the decisions he is making now, he had either made statements or speculated about them in the past, though not everything he once talked about has come to fruition. Therefore, his numerous executive orders are not "black swans" in the strict sense of the term from foresight theory.

And so it was with perhaps the most resonant and shocking decision by the current head of the White House during the first 10 weeks after his inauguration — the sudden imposition of massive tariffs on imported products from many countries around the world. This development is so monumental and extraordinary that Trump declared it a historic "Liberation Day." Whether this decision will have truly liberating and beneficial, or conversely catastrophic, consequences for the U.S. economy will become clear over time. However, it will undoubtedly go down in history for its symbolism: as another turning point in international relations that launches qualitatively new processes and provides a fresh interpretation of well-established phenomena. One such phenomenon, which has barely been discussed in the context of Trump's tariff revolution, may be economic sanctions.

The end of globalization?

The tariff decisions announced in an intentionally ceremonious atmosphere have proven to be more large-scale and far-reaching than many expected. As noted, this is the largest one-time imposition of tariffs in at least the last 70 years. With these tariffs, the U.S. administration hopes, as Donald Trump has repeated for decades, to correct the historical injustice whereby many countries, both allies and adversaries of the U.S., have been unfairly "profiting" at the expense of the American economy.

Here, it's important to clarify that the discussion isn't just about the U.S. economy, but also about its special place in the global economy, thanks to the unique status of the U.S. dollar in the world financial system and Washington's equally unique influence over the key financial institutions of the world. However, Trump and his team believe that these unique characteristics, in their current form, create more problems and costs for the U.S. than they provide benefits. Therefore, through such tariffs, he seeks to minimize these costs while maintaining and even increasing the benefits. Specifically, the plan is that the new tariff approaches, in combination with other government policy tools, will help

restore the former greatness of American industry, create many new jobs, raise the overall well-being of American citizens, reduce dependence on foreign countries and markets, and improve national finances. All this, according to MAGA Republicans, is also supposed to strengthen the security and position of the U.S. in the transforming world.

Perhaps the most frequently heard characterization of the tariffs imposed by Trump and their expected global consequences is the conclusion about the end of globalization. This is, of course, largely an emotional assessment in the wake of heated events. However, symbolically, this statement can be agreed with. At least since the late 1980s (and in fact much earlier), the U.S. has been the main driver and banner-bearer of modern globalization. This, once again, organically stemmed from the special political and financial status of the U.S. in the world. Now, however, the U.S. is making decisions unilaterally, many of which are reshaping or even halting the trajectories that supported globalization. The U.S. is effectively putting an end to the institutional pillars of globalization: numerous international intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations. This includes the very "holy grail" of globalization — the World Trade Organization (WTO).

> Going beyond just symbolism, the U.S. tariff decisions perhaps appear less dramatic in the context of globalization. After all, the slowdown and even retreat of globalization in the form we've become accustomed to over nearly four decades began earlier.

In the future, historians will likely need to establish a justified chronology of this process. However, in any case, well before the "Liberation Day," when Trump stunned much of the world with his tariffs, there had already been many landmark events that, through their cumulative effect, were altering globalization processes.

The decision of the United Kingdom in the 2016 referendum to leave the European Union will certainly have its place in this chronology. And, of course, the first presidential term of Donald Trump. In his rhetoric about the WTO and the entire system of world trade, he made no secret of his intentions. Even then, China began to emerge as a stronger advocate for free trade and other liberal principles of the global economy than the U.S. itself. A special place in the future chronology will undoubtedly be given to the coronavirus pandemic. It, through the example of massive loss of life and widespread political-economic chaos, led many to conclude that liberal ideas about the efficiency of global supply chains and the division of labor were dangerous illusions.

Another significant milestone in this chronology will be the unprecedentedly large-scale and deep sanctions imposed after the start of the Russian-Ukrainian war, which affected not only the economy. These sanctions have had and continue to have a deglobalizing effect in many areas, including at the level of basic human interaction. This effect has extended to all: those who imposed sanctions, those who were targeted by them, and even those who seemed to be on the sidelines but inevitably began to face the threat of so-called "secondary sanctions."

International relations become more straightforward

It is precisely the topic of international sanctions in the context of Trump's tariff hurricane that warrants particular attention. Some analysts and officials see the newly introduced tariffs by the U.S. administration as sanctions against much of the world. However, before diving into this, it's important to note another distinctive feature of what is happening.

> Trump's American "Liberation Day" shows us (not for the first time in recent years) that, increasingly, the U.S. foreign policy—and with it, international relations as a whole—is moving away from conventions.

Idealistic-liberal and constructivist frameworks, which Western countries often used to explain foreign policy and security decisions in a globalized world, are being left behind. While some politicians and diplomats in the West provided such explanations simply to conceal the true intentions of their decision-making centers, many others genuinely believed in the lofty motives and ideals they thought were behind even the harshest of decisions.

Currently, the practice of international relations is losing these conventions and ideological-value frameworks. Some might argue that this makes world politics less cynical. Others believe that it strips away the last remnants of idealism and normative values and brings us back to the base "natural" state described by Thomas Hobbes, where it's everyone against everyone. But in any case, regardless of our personal views on these transformations, international communication in all its forms is becoming increasingly straightforward. There is an interest – there are decisions that follow from it. These decisions can, of course, continue to be packaged in a media-friendly, virtuous wrapper, but they don't necessarily have to be. Especially since value-based packaging often gets in the way of achieving domestic political goals. The global tariffs from Trump's administration, particularly their motivational aspects, have highlighted this quite vividly.

A new-old historical interpretation of sanctions

Let's return to the topic of sanctions. Against the backdrop of growing straightforwardness in international relations, there is a historical shift in the essence and functions of sanctions. At least when it comes to interstate sanctions. Sanctions against non-state actors—such as terrorist and criminal groups—still represent a special case, the essence of which is unlikely to change.

To briefly recall the evolution of the idea of interstate sanctions after World War II, they were initially viewed in connection with the primary and only legitimate body for maintaining peace and security on the planet—the United Nations Security Council. Only the consensus will of this body could serve as a sufficient and legitimate reason for imposing sanctions.

> This was because sanctions were, by definition, intended to achieve the common good, not to satisfy the national interests or value expectations of individual states.

Their goal was the maintenance or restoration of peace and security, not the realization of subjective needs or the resolution of domestic political crises that did not threaten international security.

In the 1990s, discussions on sanctions became more active, and in the context of a unipolar world, this led to rapid changes in the application of sanctions. New theoretical approaches emerged, justifying the use of sanctions as a tool to achieve more nuanced goals than what was covered by the definition of "peace and security" during the Cold War. For example, concepts like "naive sanctions" and targeted sanctions began to emerge.

As a result, after some time, the practice of sanction enforcement moved away from the exclusive competence of the UN Security Council. Many countries, primarily in the West, began to apply sanctions unilaterally. Thanks to the unique position of the U.S. in the international financial system and its influence on the global economy, this unilateral practice quickly became the norm. Other Western states began to adopt it actively as well.

In recent decades, these countries have typically justified their sanctions policies toward third countries in much the same way that Anne-Marie Trevelyan, who oversaw sanctions policy in the British Foreign Office, did a year ago. She said: *"We decide when and where to use sanctions based on clear objectives and principles. So, our sanctions*

are designed to deter and disrupt malign behavior, but they also demonstrate our commitment to our values. We seek to shift the behavior of the actors we target and, at the same time, send a wider message."

All of this has become an integral part of globalization, which has existed until recently. However, if globalization is now changing, the practice of sanctions in interstate relations will also evolve. Like international relations in general, it will become more straightforward.

> Sanctions will return to a kind of historical norm, where national interest is a sufficient basis for even the most shocking actions, without the need for additional "value-based" packaging.

For now, this is more of a hypothesis. If it proves true, the consequences will be twofold. On one hand, the world may see a reduction in the previous sanctions frenzy, simply because Western politicians will no longer feel compelled to respond to any socially resonant events in other countries with sanctions under the formula "what else can we do to avoid pressure from our society?" On the other hand, the straightforward application of sanctions will become a new norm of geopolitical confrontation. They will be imposed not under a value-based "sauce," but on the principle of "who is not with us, is against us."

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