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# Defining Economic Security in the Trump Administration

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*“... Into this breach comes President Donald J. Trump with a new organizing principle for strategic policy: Economic security is national security.”*

*Peter Navarro<sup>1</sup>*

## Introduction

Economic security has become a highly popular policy term in Washington, D.C., since 2016. For instance, the recent supply chain issues caused by the COVID-19 pandemic brought this issue to the forefront,<sup>2</sup> and the tariffs placed on China by both the Trump and Biden administrations have highlighted the concept of economic security. Despite its trendiness, economic security has consistently been a crucial factor in evaluating national security since the nation’s founding. Since its founding, the United States has been a nation of commerce. As the country’s economy has grown, so has the definition of economic security.

To effectively explore the concept of economic security, this article proposes a framework for defining economic security, establishing a clear foundation for analysis. The next step is to apply that framework to the Trump administration. This is followed by an assessment of how the administration defines economic security. Finally, we provide some concluding thoughts. The goal is to provide guidance in understanding what economic security is. This will enable practitioners to evaluate any argument that mentions economic security, should the government use economic security as a rationale for a specific policy.

## Defining the Framework

Defining economic security is a complex concept, as there is no universally accepted definition of the term. Given the complexities, it is essential to outline a structured approach. Flexibility in defining a term has its advantages, but it also carries the potential for abuse in the form of demagoguery. In other words, using rhetoric that appeals to people’s prejudices by looking for someone or something to blame. Because there is no set definition for the term “economic security,” the next best step is to provide a framework that allows one to define it.

There are two benefits to developing this framework. The first is that it provides a standard for use when discussing economic security. The second is that it enables one to distinguish between legitimate security concerns and demagoguery. Given the definition of this concept and the evolution of economic security throughout U.S. history, I propose a framework to help define economic security as it is viewed within the Trump administration. This framework can serve any president's term or terms.

This framework has two steps. The first step in our framework is to understand the times in which we live. We need to be aware of the current trends that are impacting or have impacted U.S. foreign policy. The second step is to understand the president's goals and vision as they relate to economic security.

Defining the country's goals means addressing the issues that the president deems essential. In the past, statements regarding the president's vision and goals were found in political platforms, State of the Union speeches, or even executive orders. Then, Congress passed the Goldwater-Nichols Department of Defense Reorganization Act in 1986.<sup>3</sup> This law mandates the submission of the National Security Strategy (NSS) and requires the president to submit a report to Congress within 150 days of taking office. The report must include the following five points:

1. The worldwide interests, goals, and objectives of the United States that are vital to the United States' national security interests
2. The foreign policy, worldwide commitments, and national defense capabilities to deter aggression and to implement the U.S. national security strategies
3. Proposed short-term and long-term uses of the political, economic, military, and other elements of the U.S. national power to protect or promote the interests and achieve the goals and objectives . . .
4. The adequacy and capabilities of the United States to carry out the national security strategy . . . and
5. Such other information as may be necessary to inform Congress on matters relating to the national security strategy of the United States<sup>4</sup>

The significance of the National Security Strategy lies in the opportunity it provides to understand and assess the issues that define economic security.

### **Economic Security as Defined by President Trump**

Now that we have a framework to define economic security, let's apply the framework to the current Trump administration.

To comprehend President Trump's approach, we must first consider the broader context in which his policies were formulated. Again, the first step is to understand our current state of affairs. We can define our current state of affairs in the following manner:

- The days of the United States being the sole superpower in the world are numbered. Secretary of State Marco Rubio stated the following in an interview with Megan Kelly:

And I think that was lost at the end of the Cold War, because we were the only power in the world, and so we assumed this responsibility of sort of becoming the global government in many cases, trying to solve every problem. And there are terrible things happening in the world. There are. And then there are things that are terrible that impact our national interest directly, and we need to prioritize those again. So it's not normal for the world to simply have a unipolar power . . . It was a product of the end of the Cold War, but eventually, you were going to reach back to a point where you had a multipolar world, multiple great powers in different parts of the planet. We face that now with China and to some extent Russia, and then you have rogue states like Iran and North Korea, you have to deal with . . . And so we need to really work hard to avoid armed conflict as much as possible, but never at the expense of our national interest. So that's the tricky balance.<sup>5</sup>

For those who are unfamiliar with international relations, the term "multipolar" refers to ". . . the idea that there are many important global powers, not just a few superpowers . . ."<sup>6</sup>

- We are in the early stages of Cold War 2.0, characterized by a competition between Russia and China. China seeks to supplant us both economically and militarily. Russia seeks to supplant us militarily.<sup>7</sup> China is utilizing its economic influence to attempt to dismantle or bifurcate the existing international trade system.<sup>8</sup> For instance, both Russia and China are part of the BRICS, a trade group primarily comprising Brazil, Russia, India, and China. A few years ago, Brazil's President Lula sought to establish a BRICS currency, aiming to counter the dollar's strength as the primary currency in international trade. Lula argues, ". . . It's not about replacing our currencies, but we need to work so that the multipolar order we aim for is reflected in the international financial system . . ."<sup>9</sup> Lula's call for an alternative currency reinforces the idea "that China is accelerating efforts to construct an alternative

*... continued on page 79*

## Defining Economic Security in the Trump Administration, continued from page 23



trade architecture that is insulated from the U.S. influence and centered upon the developing world.”<sup>10</sup>

- Our free trade agreements have not guaranteed that our trading partners will be democratic. For example, Nicaragua is ruled autocratically. Its policies are anti-American, yet it benefits from our trade agreement.<sup>11</sup>
- “In a globalized economy, foreign commerce and domestic commerce are difficult to disentangle.”<sup>12</sup> In other words, commerce is becoming both international and domestic. We will discuss this in the next section.

Considering the current state of the world, we must next assess the president’s vision and goals for the economy. Recently, the president, at the time of this writing, announced that he was imposing tariffs through the IEEPA (International Emergency Economic Powers Act).<sup>13</sup> The president’s announcement allowed us to understand how the administration defines economic security. His statement is a restatement of his views on international trade that were made during his first administration. In announcing the tariffs, the president stated the following:

- Large and persistent annual U.S. goods trade deficits have led to the hollowing out of our manufacturing base; resulted in a lack of incentive to increase advanced domestic manufacturing capacity; undermined critical supply chains; and rendered our defense-industrial base dependent on foreign adversaries.
- Pernicious economic policies and practices of our trading partners undermine our ability to produce essential goods for the public and the military, threatening national security.

- These tariffs seek to address the injustices of global trade, re-shore manufacturing, and drive economic growth for the American people.
- Reciprocal trade is America First trade because it increases our competitive edge, protects our sovereignty, and strengthens our national and economic security.
- These tariffs adjust for the unfairness of ongoing international trade practices, balance our chronic goods trade deficit, provide an incentive for re-shoring production to the United States, and provide our foreign trading partners with an opportunity to rebalance their trade relationships with the United States.
- Access to the American market is a privilege, not a right.
- The United States will no longer put itself last on matters of international trade in exchange for empty promises.<sup>14</sup>

Regarding China, the White House’s statement had the following:

China’s non-market policies and practices have given China global dominance in key manufacturing industries, decimating U.S. industry. Between 2001 and 2018, these practices contributed to the loss of 3.7 million U.S. jobs due to the growth of the U.S.-China trade deficit, displacing workers and undermining American competitiveness while threatening U.S. economic and national security by increasing our reliance on foreign-controlled supply chains for critical industries as well as everyday goods.<sup>15</sup>

Based on these statements, the Trump administration defines economic security as the revitalization of the American manufacturing sector to achieve national self-sufficiency. Phrases such as “undermin[ing] our ability to produce essential goods, reshoring (‘The process of bringing back manufacturing or production operations to their country of origin or a nearby region’)<sup>16</sup> production to the United States,” and “China decimating U.S. industry . . .” reinforce the importance of self-sufficiency. These statements, along with those made during his first term, provide insight into how the administration will define and approach economic security.<sup>17</sup>

### Assessing President Trump’s Vision of Economic Security

Now that we have defined economic security under President Trump, we can analyze the president’s definition of economic security. Four things stand out. The first is that his concept of

economic security is similar to the idea of a “Fortress America.” Historically, this term was associated with the isolationism of the 1930’s. However, when critics say that the president is an isolationist, they are using the wrong term. Trump’s NSS under his first administration calls for a renegotiated free trade agreement, as seen when the United States, Canada, and Mexico renegotiated NAFTA during his first administration. The concept of “Fortress America” is based on the idea that U.S. companies will bring their factories back to the United States and that foreign companies, to avoid tariffs, will establish factories and hire U.S. workers. The recent decision by Hyundai Steel to build a factory in Louisiana is an example of Trump’s vision.<sup>18</sup> At the core of this vision is self-sufficiency. Foreign trade will be at a minimum, as U.S. consumers will no longer need to purchase foreign goods.

The second point is that, in the short term, President Trump’s definition of economic security represents a repudiation of the previous Republican president, George W. Bush. Here is the Bush administration’s NSS as it relates to free trade:

A strong world economy enhances our national security by advancing prosperity and freedom in the rest of the world. Economic growth, supported by free trade and free markets, creates new jobs and higher incomes. It allows people to lift their lives out of poverty, spurs economic and legal reform, and the fight against corruption, and it reinforces the habits of liberty. . . .<sup>19</sup>

In contrast, President Trump’s First NSS argued:

The United States helped expand the liberal economic trading system to countries that did not share our values, in the hopes that these states would liberalize their economic and political practices and provide commensurate benefits to the United States . . . . For decades, the United States has allowed unfair trading practices to grow. Other countries have used dumping, discriminatory non-tariff barriers, forced technology transfers, non-economic capacity, industrial subsidies, and other support from governments and state-owned enterprises to gain economic advantages.<sup>20</sup>

Note the differences between the two NSS. President Bush’s NSS adopts the view that international trade is a vital component of national security strategy. International trade enables people, including those in the United States, to escape poverty, fosters greater democracy, and promotes the fight against corruption through the rule of law. Ultimately, this leads to global peace.

In contrast, President Trump’s NSS defines international trade as an element of domestic politics. The NSS focuses on

the losses, not the gains of international trade. It highlights how the United States has been the victim of unfair trading practices and how U.S. leadership, specifically the Bush administration, failed to defend U.S. workers.

The third item is that President Trump’s vision of economic security follows a pattern set by Presidents Obama and Biden. President Trump’s vision of economic security continues to move international trade from a foreign policy matter to a domestic matter. As previously noted, foreign commerce and domestic commerce are increasingly interwoven. To explain this, excerpts of comments made by previous U.S. presidents are needed.

As previously stated, the United States was a nation of commerce. President Washington’s farewell speech captures this idea well when he says, “The great rule of conduct for us in regards to foreign nations is in extending commercial relations, to have with them as little political connections as possible . . . .”<sup>21</sup> In other words, international trade, not building alliances, was the core mission of U.S. foreign policy.<sup>22</sup> Another example of how international trade influenced U.S. foreign policy is this statement from President Martin Van Buren: “. . . We sedulously cultivate the friendship of all nations as conditions most compatible with our welfare and the principles of our Government. We decline alliances . . . We desire commercial relations on equal terms, being ever willing to give a fair equivalent for advantages received . . . .”<sup>23</sup>

As the United States grew in economic and military power, a shift in Washington, D.C.’s stance on alliances occurred under President Warren Harding. President Harding said, “America was ‘ready to encourage, eager to initiate, [and] anxious to participate’ in any program ‘likely to lessen the possibility of war.’ The goal was nothing short of ‘a high place in the moral leadership of civilization’ . . . .” Engaging in trade for the benefit of the United States would, therefore, no longer be sufficient.<sup>24</sup>

During the Cold War, President Truman continued the point made by President Harding. For President Truman, international trade was crucial in countering the spread of communism. Specifically, he said, “The seeds of totalitarian regimes are nurtured by misery and want. They spread and grown the evil in the soil of poverty and want. They reach their full growth when the hope of a people for a better life has died . . . .” In other words, communism thrives in poverty.<sup>25</sup>

When President George W. Bush was in office, international trade was entirely part of the foreign policy toolkit. U.S. Trade Representative Robert Zoellick, during the early stages of the Global War on Terror in 2003, said:

The primary reason for the proliferation of free trade agreements was the idea that trade promotes freedom by supporting the development of the

private sector, encouraging the rule of law, spurring economic liberty, and increasing freedom of choice. Trade also [serves] our security interests in the campaign against terrorism by helping tackle the global challenges of poverty and privation. Poverty does not cause terrorism, but there is little doubt that poor, fragmented societies can become havens in which terrorist thrives.<sup>26</sup>

Secretary of State Rice echoed these comments in a 2008 essay, explaining that “A rising middle class also creates new centers of social power for political movements and parties. Trade is a divisive issue in our country right now, but we must not forget that it is essential not only for our health of our domestic economy but also for the success of our foreign policy.”<sup>27</sup> Note the last clause of that statement, “it is essential not only for our health of our domestic economy, but also for the success of our foreign policy.” We observe that international trade has both domestic and international aspects.

By the time President Obama was elected in 2008, a shift in how international trade was viewed in U.S. policy began to emerge. President Obama’s NSS states the following: “We have responsibilities at home to continue improving our banking practices and forging ahead with regulatory reform, even as we press others to align with our robust standards.”<sup>28</sup> In addition to securing our immediate economic interests, we must drive the inclusive economic growth that creates demand for American exports.”<sup>29</sup> The phrase “even as we press others (i.e., trading partners) to align with our robust standards . . .” stands in contrast with the Bush administration’s NSS, which states that it will allow the country to develop its economic policies and laws on its own. Under the Bush administration, the potential trading partner was allowed to develop its laws. Under the Obama administration, applying U.S. standards, whether they fit or not, is the price of admission to the U.S. market. Since we discussed President Trump in the previous section, we will now focus on President Biden.

When President Biden succeeded President Trump, President Biden continued to view international trade as a domestic policy issue. For instance, President Biden’s NSS states:

We have an affirmative agenda for the global economy to seize the full range of economic benefits of the 21st century while advancing the interests of American workers.

Later on, the Biden NSS states:

Since 1945, the United States has led the creation of institutions, norms, and standards to govern

international trade and investment, economic policy, and technology. These mechanisms advanced America’s economic and geopolitical aims and benefited people around the world by shaping how governments and economies interacted—and did so in ways that aligned with U.S. interests and values. These mechanisms have not kept pace with economic or technological changes, and today risk being irrelevant, or in certain cases, actively harmful to solving the challenges we now face—from insecure supply chains to widening inequality to the abuses of the PRC’s nonmarket economic actions.<sup>30</sup>

As you can see, the views of Presidents Obama, Trump, and Biden on international trade are essentially the same. In their opinion, the United States has been taken advantage of by our friends and allies; those actions are responsible for the loss of U.S. jobs and factories. As a result, we need to protect the U.S. economy by forcing our trading partners to adapt to our policies, or we will place tariffs on them. The difference between these three presidents is the extent to which they are willing to impose tariffs.

The fourth and final item is the need for Congress to intervene. The Constitution granted Congress the power to raise tariffs, as tariffs are a form of taxation. The challenge lies in the ever-expanding definition of security that needs to be addressed, specifically in the context of international trade. Because defining economic security is based on assessment, there is always the fear that anything goes. For example, when issues are framed in terms of national security, the intent to carefully assess is replaced by crisis management thinking. Act now and question later seems to be the way Washington, D.C., operates. What makes it more challenging is that national security is one area that courts are reluctant to review. Courts traditionally give deference to both Congress and the president in matters of foreign affairs, but what happens when the executive chooses to take advantage of that deference as a way to bypass the Constitution?<sup>31</sup>

Congress is partially to blame for deferring to the president without assessing the president’s decision. However, Congress, during the drafting of this article, has responded by introducing legislation that calls for accountability when the president decides to raise tariffs under the International Emergency Economic Powers Act (IEEPA). The sponsors of this legislation are Sen. Charles Grassley (R-IA) and Sen. Maria Cantwell (D-WA). The legislation requires congressional review of the president’s designation and a vote on the tariffs.<sup>32</sup> It is a privilege for products to enter the American market. Still, it is also a privilege for the president and members of Congress to serve their constituents when the economy is in good shape.

## Conclusion

I hope that the International Law Section will initiate a debate on economic security. International trade is a vital pillar of Florida's economy. My concern is that our current class of elected leaders, both Republicans and Democrats, either lacks an appreciation for international trade or chooses to ignore it, deferring instead to their political consultants or to think tanks for advice.

As lawyers, we have a different perspective. We are on the proverbial front lines in how the laws are implemented. The impacts and consequences of any statutes or tariffs are real and not imagined or hypothetical. Since we are most familiar with the effects of bad laws, the International Law Section should initiate this debate on economic security. We can't rely on Washington, D.C., to begin this conversation. We need to have this honest debate, where diverse viewpoints are heard, ranging from the "globalist" to the "America First" and all those in between. The discussion could focus on alternative definitions of economic security and what new legislation would be required to prevent abuse of the security process. Lawyers play a role in developing policy. As such, we must take the initiative to educate.



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*Author's note: The views and opinions expressed in this article are my own and do not necessarily reflect the views or positions of the Law Offices of Poblete Tamargo or our clients.*

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Peter Navarro, "Why Economic Security Is National Security," [https://www.realclearpolitics.com/articles/2018/12/09/why\\_economic\\_security\\_is\\_national\\_security\\_138875.html](https://www.realclearpolitics.com/articles/2018/12/09/why_economic_security_is_national_security_138875.html) (last visited 6 Apr. 2025).

<sup>2</sup> See Emily Benson and Catharine Mouradian, *How Do the United States and Its Partners Approach Economic Security?* <https://www.csis.org/analysis/how-do-united-states-and-its-partners-approach-economic-security> (last visited 23 Mar. 2025).

<sup>3</sup> Laura K. Donohue, *The Limits of National Security*, 48 AM. CRIM. L. REV. 1573, 1715–16. (Quoting the Goldwater-Nichols Department of Defense Reorganization Act § 603).

<sup>4</sup> *Id.* at 1716.

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.state.gov/secretary-marco-rubio-with-megyn-kelly-of-the-megyn-kelly-show/> (last visited April 6, 2025).

<sup>6</sup> Emma Ashford and Evan Cooper, *Yes, the World Is Multipolar*, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/10/05/usa-china-multipolar-bipolar-unipolar/> (last visited 6 Apr. 2025).

<sup>7</sup> The term Cold War 2.0 was used by geopolitical strategist Valenia Tchakarova. See February 18th tweet, "You are witnessing the manifestation of Cold War 2.0 between America and the DragonBear. These are Trump's carrots

for Russia to lure it away from the #DragonBear—the modus operandi of coordination between CNRU in all systemically relevant domains."

<sup>8</sup> Brad Glosserman, *The Inexorable Movement Toward A Divided Global Economy*, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/commentary/2024/02/28/global-economy/> (last visited 5 Apr. 2025). "China is accelerating efforts to construct an alternative trade architecture that is insulated from U.S. influence and centered upon the developing world."

<sup>9</sup> Reuters, <https://www.reuters.com/technology/brazils-lula-urges-brics-create-alternative-payment-methods-2024-10-23/> (last visited 23 Mar. 2025).

<sup>10</sup> Glosserman, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/commentary/2024/02/28/global-economy/>, (last visited 23 Mar. 2025).

<sup>11</sup> Andres Oppenheimer, *How can the U.S. condemn Nicaragua's dictator while propping up his robust economy?* <https://www.miamiherald.com/article272540705.html> (last visited 6 Apr. 2025).

<sup>12</sup> Kathleen Clausen & Timothy Meyer, *Economic Security and the Separation of Powers*, 172 U. PA. L. REV. 1955, 1977 (2024).

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.whitehouse.gov/fact-sheets/2025/04/fact-sheet-president-donald-j-trump-declares-national-emergency-to-increase-our-competitive-edge-protect-our-sovereignty-and-strengthen-our-national-and-economic-security/>. See also, Jennifer K. Elsea, *Enforcement of Economic Sanctions: An Overview*, <https://www.congress.gov/h%22%3A%22%5C%22International+Emergency+Economic+Powers+Act%5C%22%22%7D&s=8&r=12> (Elsea explains the International Emergency Economic Powers Act: The International Emergency Economic Powers Act was passed by Congress in 1977. "The President may, upon declaring a national emergency involving any 'unusual and extraordinary threat, which has its source in whole or substantial part outside the United States,' restrict or prohibit a wide range of transactions involving 'property in which any foreign country or a national thereof has any interest by any person, or with respect to any property, subject to the jurisdiction of the United States'").

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.whitehouse.gov/fact-sheets/2025/04/fact-sheet-president-donald-j-trump-declares-national-emergency-to-increase-our-competitive-edge-protect-our-sovereignty-and-strengthen-our-national-and-economic-security/>.

<sup>15</sup> *Id.*

<sup>16</sup> Rachel Labeux, *What is Reshoring?* <https://www.techtarget.com/searchcio/definition/reshoring> (last visited 6 Apr. 2025).

<sup>17</sup> *Supra* note 14 and see <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf> (last visited 6 Apr. 2025).

<sup>18</sup> Hyunjoon Jin and Jihoon Lee, *Hyundai Steel unveils US factory plan, shares skid*, <https://www.reuters.com/markets/commodities/hyundai-steel-build-plant-louisiana-with-annual-output-27-million-tonnes-2025-03-25/> (last visited 6 Apr. 2025).

<sup>19</sup> <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/nsc/nss/2002/nss6.html>. (last visited 31 Mar. 2025).

<sup>20</sup> <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf>, p. 16.

<sup>21</sup> *Id.*

<sup>22</sup> *Id.* at p. 1603 (Quoting President Martin Van Buren's Second Inaugural Address (4 Mar. 1837) in Inaugural Address at 77).

<sup>23</sup> *Id.* at 1646.

<sup>24</sup> *Id.* at 1672.

<sup>25</sup> William Krist, *Globalization and America's Trade Agreement, Chapter 5 Foreign Policy: The Other Driver*, quoting Statement of Robert B. Zoellick, U.S. Trade Representative before the Committee on Finance, U.S. Senate, 5 Mar. 2003. <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/chapter-5-foreign-policy-the-other-driver-0> (last visited 6 Apr. 2025).

<sup>26</sup> *Id.*, quoting Condoleezza Rice, "Rethinking the National Interest" *Foreign Affairs*, July–August 2008, 2–3. <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/chapter-5-foreign-policy-the-other-driver-0> (last visited 6 Apr. 2025).

<sup>27</sup> [https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/sites/default/files/docs/2015\\_national\\_security\\_strategy\\_2.pdf](https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/sites/default/files/docs/2015_national_security_strategy_2.pdf) (last visited 6 Apr. 2025), p.16.

<sup>28</sup> *Id.* at p. 17.

<sup>29</sup> <https://bidenwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/8-November-Combined-PDF-for-Upload.pdf>, pp. 34–5. (last visited 5 Apr. 2025).

<sup>30</sup> Donohue, at 1752. As an example, consider the following statement from then Sen. Barbara Mikulski regarding prescription drugs, "Are we moving with a sense of urgency? Has this been escalated to a homeland security issue . . . this has to be elevated to a national security, homeland security, and criminal level." Donahue, fn. 1289 quoting *Securing the Pharmaceutical Supply Chain*:

Hearing Before the S. Health, Educ., Labor and Pension Comm., 112th Cong. (14 Sept. 2011).

<sup>31</sup> Ben Leonard, *Top Republican leads bill to reassert Congress' tariff power amid Trump trade war*, <https://www.politico.com/live-updates/2025/04/03/congress/top-republican-leads-bill-to-reassert-congress-tariff-power-amid-trump-trade-war-00268710>. See link to the bill: [https://www.cantwell.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/04032025\\_trade\\_review\\_act.pdf](https://www.cantwell.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/04032025_trade_review_act.pdf). See also *Clausen and Meyer, supra* note 12, where the authors propose specific measures for Congress to address the executive branch's abuse of the IEEPA and the Trade Act.



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