Tariffs are a step toward military mobilization

written by Gary Wilson
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Production of 155mm shells in the U.S.

The Trump administration's April 2 "emergency" executive order reveals that military readiness and defense industrial capability — not merely economic protectionism — are the primary objectives. The administration has explicitly positioned these policies as necessary to rebuild U.S. manufacturing capacity for war.

The April 2 executive order states:

"Large and persistent annual U.S. goods trade deficits have led to the hollowing out of our manufacturing base; inhibited our ability to scale advanced domestic manufacturing capacity; undermined critical supply chains; and rendered our defense-industrial base dependent on foreign adversaries."

Billionaire hedge fund (Bridgewater Associates) manager Ray Dalio says that tariffs prepare the economy for war.

Tariffs "can reduce both current account and capital account imbalances," Dalio writes. "Which in plain English means reducing the dependencies on foreign production and foreign capital which is especially valued in times of global geopolitical conflicts/wars."

Dalio thinks: "The United States and China are now in a trade war, a technology war, a geopolitical influence war, and a capital/economic war, and they are now dangerously close to a military war."

The 'Arsenal of Democracy'

Peter Navarro, White House Senior Counselor for Trade and Manufacturing and author of the Project 2025 chapter on trade, says that military expansion is the goal, to build an "Arsenal of Democracy," the term Franklin D. Roosevelt used to describe the United States’ role as a major supplier of weaponry, supplies, and other military aid to Allied countries during World War II.

On Fox News, Navarro said:

“The bigger picture here is restoring the American manufacturing base. We don’t have that. We’re an assembly… you remember… something called the Arsenal of Democracy back in World War II? That was how we beat the Japanese and the Germans with our military might. When [U.S. General George] Patton [and the U.S. Army] went to Berlin [in 1945] it was with trucks, jeeps and tanks that were made in the auto plants of the Midwest [of the U.S.] and right now the only thing that looks like the Midwest [did] back then is Mexico. You go across the diaspora [sic] of cities in Mexico, there’s … 50 football field size assembly plants that are down there [and that] make the engines for here. We can’t do that. The Germans and the Japanese, the South Koreans and the Mexicans have taken our manufacturing capabilities so we’ve got to get that back. […] If we don’t have a solid auto industry, when we have problems in the world, we’re going to be speaking some other language.”

Strategically, U.S. military planners worry about inadequate civilian industrial capacity, which limits the country’s ability to convert civilian industries for wartime production quickly. Immediately concerning is the widespread consensus that current military production levels are insufficient and slow to expand, hampered by skilled labor shortages and a weak industrial base.

In November 2024, Admiral Samuel Paparo, head of the U.S. Indo-Pacific Command, told Military.com that supplying significant military aid to Ukraine and Israel had compromised the U.S.’s readiness to respond to potential crises in the Indo-Pacific region, particularly regarding Taiwan. Paparo said that the Ukraine and Gaza interventions are depleting critical ammunition stockpiles and emphasized the urgent need to replenish supplies beyond current levels.

Upon confirmation in January 2025, Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth vowed to rebuild military capabilities by revitalizing the defense industrial base, streamlining procurement, achieving fiscal accountability, and rapidly deploying emerging technologies.

Globalized manufacturing

Trump's extreme tariff strategy, which targets all foreign nations, won't be able to bolster isolated military-related industries, given the realities of modern production. The production of complex goods now depends on a globalized division of labor, with scales of specialization and technological intricacy surpassing the capacity of any single country, including the largest economies. Such production demands immense societal resources, a requirement fundamentally incompatible with the profit-driven, market-centric framework of U.S. imperialism.

Globalized manufacturing is not merely about outsourcing to exploit low-wage markets in the Global South. It also relies on a division of labor among wealthy imperialist states, each leveraging distinct industrial and technological specialties. This system serves as a mechanism to contain China, which faces not isolated adversaries like the U.S., Japan, or Europe, but a coalition of imperialist powers united by their shared structural dominance in the global economy. These states collectively benefit from exploiting China and other countries in the Global South.

Should the global trade order fracture, the U.S. would still need to sustain alliances with key imperialist and subordinated states in the Global South to preserve an international (if no longer fully global) division of labor — a structure that defined the first Cold War. Before 1991, imperialist economies thrived without access to Chinese labor, Eastern European manufacturing, or Russian resources. Today, agreements like the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA) ensure U.S. imperialism retains control over regional pools of low-wage labor and natural resources.

No imperialist state, including the U.S., can sustain capitalism in isolation. Their wealth and capital accumulation depend critically on extracting value from the Global South through unequal trade relations, securing super-profits that far exceed average returns. Even non-market activities, such as war production, rely on efficiencies derived from globalized supply chains and labor hierarchies. Ultimately, imperialist dominance is meaningless without mechanisms to exploit that power — a reality inseparable from capitalism's drive for profit.