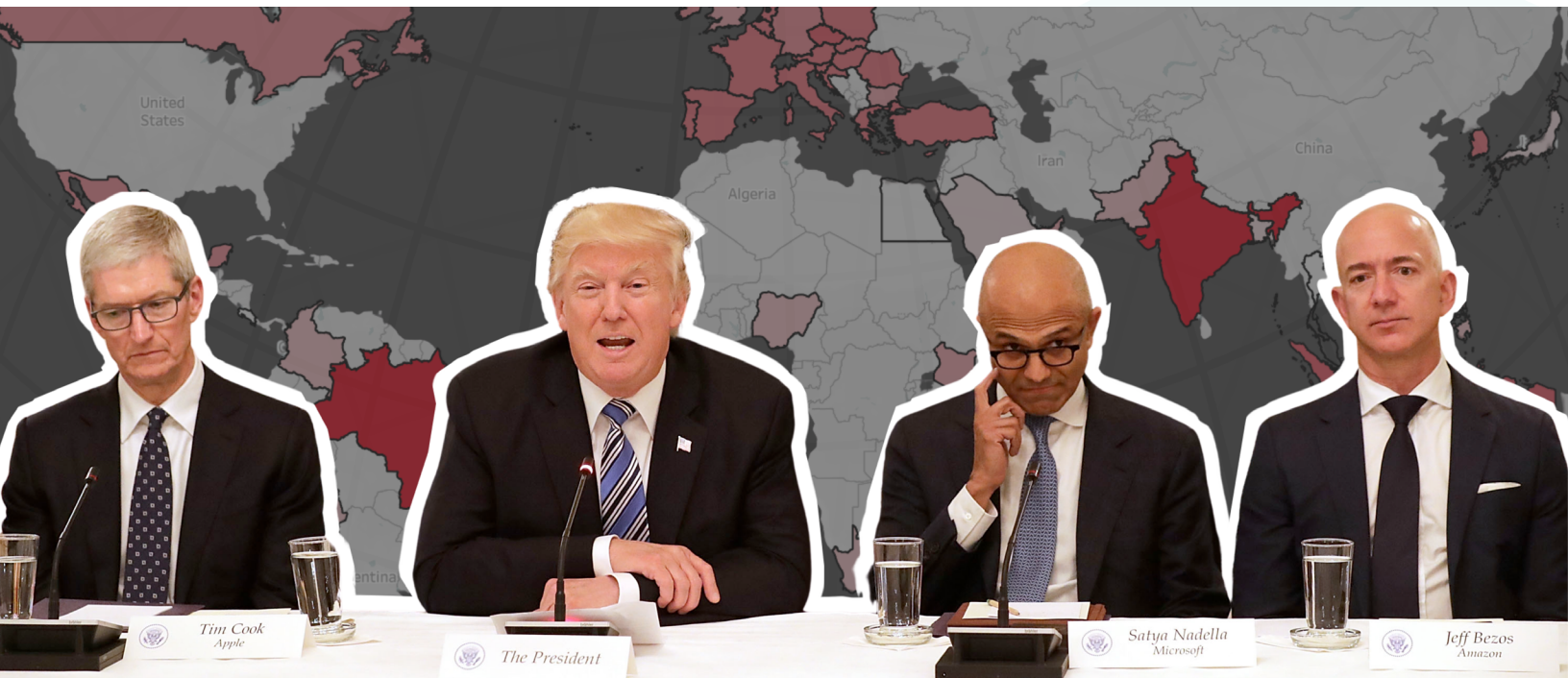


Method to the Madness: How Trump's Chaotic Trade Agenda Benefits Big Tech

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A close examination of the dizzying chaos surrounding President Trump's tariff threats and secretive "trade deals" shows a disturbing throughline: this is nothing but a shakedown on behalf of Big Tech. President Trump's trade policy has been a relentless barrage of bullying foreign countries to force them to drop any and all attempts at regulating the digital economy.

While he claims this will benefit the American economy, nothing could be further from the truth. President Trump's deregulatory agenda — both at home and abroad — definitely benefits his Big Tech buddies, but the losers are consumers, workers, and small businesses, in the U.S. and globally.

Understanding the Trump Trade Policy: Big Tech First

From the very outset, this administration’s “America First” agenda has really been a “Big Tech First” agenda, as was made clear by the release of the [Presidential Directive to Prevent Unfair Exploitation of American Innovation](#) in February 2025. This policy put the world on notice that the Trump administration planned to bat for Big Tech companies, who the memorandum claimed needed protection from “overseas extortion.”

This memorandum was followed by the release of the National Trade Estimates (NTE) Report in March this year, which [unfortunately reverted to type](#) in listing a host of foreign countries’ public interest regulations as unfair trade barriers.



Unlike the 2024 NTE report, which recognized that foreign countries have a sovereign right to regulate in public interest, this year’s report goes back to regurgitating Big Tech’s “hit list” of other countries’ critical public interest regulations—such as data protection and privacy laws, rules that promote competition in the digital ecosystem, and AI regulations — many of which are similar to policies that the U.S. is trying to implement at the federal and state levels.

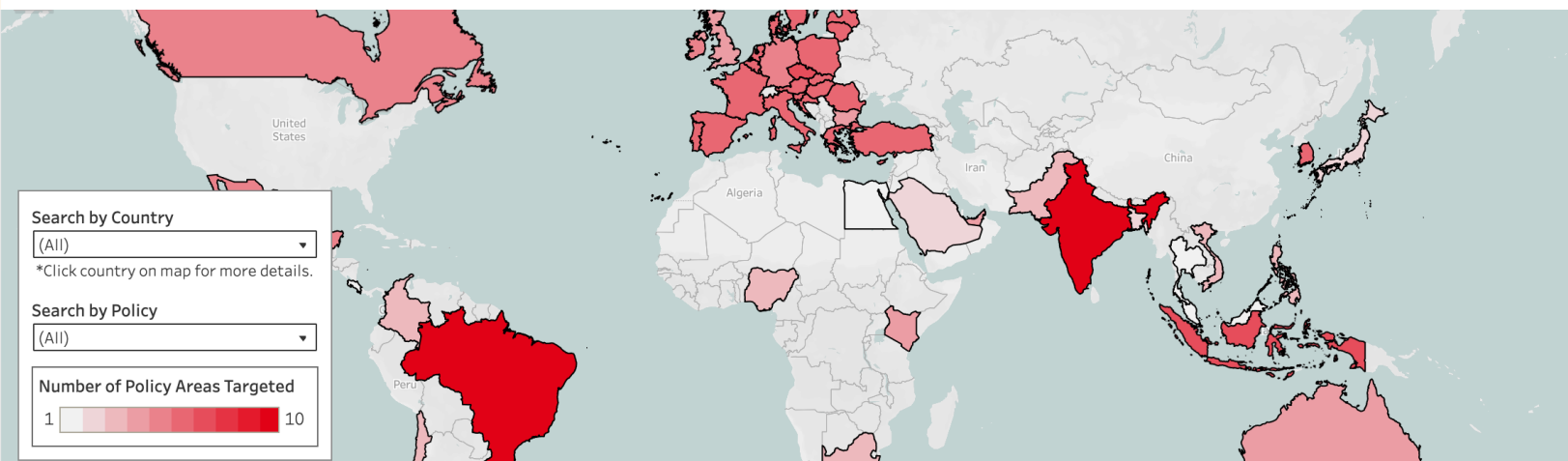
At Trump’s April 2 “Liberation Day” tariff announcement, he waved around the NTE report, calling it his “special book.” The tariff levels on those infamous poster boards were theoretically informed by another executive order-mandated report that the U.S. Trade Representative’s office has never made public. A Freedom of Information request for the report is pending.

While awaiting that request, Public Citizen [analyzed hundreds](#) of pages of tech lobbyists’ comments to the USTR that fed into the unpublished “Reciprocal Tariffs” report. That analysis revealed that Big Tech and their lobbyists are [pushing for dozens of countries](#) to do away with over a hundred laws that seek to regulate the digital ecosystem — all to reduce their compliance obligations and enhance their profits.

What Laws Are on Big Tech’s Hit List?

Big Tech has consistently sought to use the trade arena as a means to block regulation of the tech sector around the world. Under Trump, Big Tech’s deregulatory efforts have been even more successful, perhaps due to the close links between the administration and various tech companies.

Of particular interest to tech companies are laws that target their monopolistic business practices, or that seek to ensure consumer protection and online safety — whether in the context of social media services, AI systems, or indeed, ensuring privacy and data protection rights for users.



Browse digital economy-related regulations and policies that Big Tech companies and their lobbyists are eager for the U.S. government to target on [our interactive map](#).

Big Tech’s hit list, therefore, includes:



Privacy and data protection laws: The importance of the data economy has led to a number of jurisdictions, such as the **EU, Brazil, India, the Philippines, and Canada**, seeking to regulate how companies can process, store, and [export](#) personal data. A number of countries are also attempting to regulate the processing of non-personal data to ensure fairness in the digital economy and development of local tech ecosystems. Big Tech would of course prefer to move data from one jurisdiction to another without any restrictions at all — which allows them to evade data protection and privacy obligations, and reduces their compliance obligations.



Anti-monopoly laws: A number of jurisdictions, notably the **EU, South Korea, Japan, India**, and others, are attempting to create fairer and more competitive digital ecosystems by implementing specific digital sector-related competition regulation. This includes, for instance, ex ante regulation aimed at preventing dominant digital entities from engaging in particularly harmful behaviour, which is essential for smaller and medium-sized enterprises to grow and to ensure consumers have sufficient choice. However, [tech companies \(wrongly\) insist that such regulations are discriminatory](#), despite being neutral in their application.



AI regulation and source code disclosure: The growth of the AI industry has led a number of jurisdictions, such as the **EU, Brazil, Canada, and Australia**, to implement regulations to govern the development and deployment of AI systems to address known and potential harms. Some AI related regulations also seek to ensure transparency of AI systems to ensure that they are not discriminatory, anti-competitive, or otherwise harmful to users. One of the ways in which transparency of digital systems can be enhanced and harm prevented is by enabling regulators and independent researchers to access source code. [Big Tech companies](#) want to limit the ways in which AI is regulated to reduce their compliance costs and oversight, [thereby reducing accountability for complex AI and other systems](#).



Revenue sharing regulations: Several jurisdictions, notably **Australia and Canada**, are seeking to prevent the cannibalization of domestic industries (such as publishing and content production) by large streaming or other digital services. A number of countries have also sought to introduce regulations that would require large technology companies and platforms to contribute towards network development, including by compensating telecom service providers. Big Tech companies again wrongly complain that such revenue-sharing discriminates against them, when in fact such laws apply irrespective of the country in which these global tech companies are based.





DSTs and other taxes: Many countries are unable to appropriately levy income tax on Big Tech companies, as these companies do not have a physical presence within their borders. In the absence of a global taxation agreement (which was derailed by the Trump administration), countries such as the **UK, France, Kenya** and **Turkiye**, plan to or have implemented [Digital Services Taxes](#) (DST) to ensure that these companies pay tax within their jurisdictions. Others implement some

form of value added tax (VAT) or customs duties to increase their tax base. All such taxes are opposed by Big Tech companies, who not only pay less than their fair share of taxes in the U.S. but also seek to avoid paying their fair share of taxes in countries where they profit around the globe.

How Are Tariffs Being Used to Force Deregulation?

President Trump has explicitly used his threats of sweeping 'reciprocal tariffs' to bully other countries to deregulate the tech ecosystem. Exhibit A: his social media post of August 25, 2025, in which he threatened to impose tariffs, export controls, and take other punitive action against countries that had the temerity to try and regulate U.S. based Big Tech companies.



Donald J. Trump  
@realDonaldTrump

As the President of the United States, I will stand up to Countries that attack our incredible American Tech Companies. Digital Taxes, Digital Services Legislation, and Digital Markets Regulations are all designed to harm, or discriminate against, American Technology... Show respect to America and our amazing Tech Companies or, consider the consequences!

Exhibit B: his social media post of July 9, 2025, in which he announced the imposition of 50% tariffs on imports from Brazil, in part due to Brazil's recent attempts to regulate U.S. social media companies such as Twitter/X (which just so happens to be owned by Elon Musk). This rhetoric has been replicated by a number of [other administration officials](#), for instance, [J.D. Vance attacked the European Union's digital regulations](#) and even [linked U.S. support of NATO to deregulation](#) of Elon Musk's digital platforms.

Trump has used his sweeping tariff threats to force countries to enter into [supposed trade deals \(or framework agreements\) that unabashedly seek to secure the interests of the biggest U.S. companies.](#)

As pointed out by various members of the U.S. [Senate](#) and [House of Representatives](#), these deals are also ripe for corruption, being negotiated behind closed doors and in complete secrecy.

For example:

- The [White House](#) claims that a trade deal with **Indonesia** will force the country to recognize the U.S. as a jurisdiction providing adequate data protection standards under its privacy law, thereby enabling free flows of data from Indonesia to the U.S. Indonesia has also reportedly agreed to sign up to the World Trade Organization's controversial E-Commerce Moratorium, which will prevent it from implementing taxes over the import of digital products and services.
- Leaked reports indicate that [Bangladesh](#) has agreed to sign up to global rules on the cross border flows of data, increase dialogue with the U.S. in framing its data protection regulations, and also several amendments to its cybersecurity and intermediary regulations.
- **Canada** [agreed to withdraw its digital services tax](#) due to President Trump's threats to suspend negotiations on a trade deal.
- A number of countries, such as **Vietnam, Pakistan, and Lesotho**, have agreed to allow entry have agreed to allow entry of [Elon Musk's Starlink](#), easing compliance norms and even amending domestic laws to ensure quick entry of a service that many have security and other concerns about.

A number of countries have also apparently made concessions by pausing enforcement of digital economy-related regulations in advance of negotiations with the U.S. government. For example, [India](#) has withdrawn its "equalization levy," a tax on advertising revenues of Big Tech companies, while [Australia](#) appears to be slow-walking enforcement of its news media bargaining code.

Trump's Threats Continue Despite Concessions

None of these concessions has satisfied Trump. Even countries that have signed supposed “deals” with this administration continue to face pressure to further deregulate or face additional tariffs.

For example, after announcing a U.S.-EU framework deal, Trump [threatened punitive actions](#) against the European Union for its independent regulatory findings that Apple and Google breached their obligations under the EU’s digital rulebook. Similar threats have been made against Korea and Japan.



Trump has also ruthlessly [used trade threats against Brazil](#), for purely political reasons, on behalf of his buddy and fellow coup attempter Jair Bolsonaro. The U.S. administration claimed a ridiculous “[national emergency](#)” to impose 50% tariffs on Brazilian products and also opened an [investigation into Brazil’s supposed “unfair trade practices”](#) related to its [social media regulation, digital payments regulation, and data protection law](#).

Within the U.S., there is ongoing debate about social media platforms and how to handle hate speech and misinformation online. Election-related disinformation is a particularly pernicious problem in Brazil, with research indicating that more than 86% of voters encountered electoral misinformation during the 2018 Brazilian presidential election.

As a result, Brazil has taken steps to address this problem, including by requiring social media platforms to have a local presence responsible for monitoring and removing harmful content. This led to a [dramatic public conflict](#) with Elon Musk, in which X (formerly Twitter) refused to comply, resulting in the platform’s suspension in Brazil for about 40 days.

Hypocrisy does not deter Trump. While his administration actively forces other countries like the EU and Bangladesh to sign up to rules that prohibit taxing electronic transmissions, such as the WTO's E-Commerce Moratorium, Trump announces huge tariffs on foreign made films, [which would violate not just the E-Commerce Moratorium, but also U.S. commitments under the WTO's General Agreement on Trade in Services](#).

Who Benefits From Trump's Trade Policy?

Contrary to what Trump says, his trade chaos does not serve the interests of American consumers, workers, or small enterprises. Rather than engaging in meaningful action to reshore manufacturing or create good jobs in the services sector, the Trump administration is using trade policy to further enrich tech billionaires, whom President Trump has been [winning and dining](#). And all this at the expense of global consumer rights and other critical public interests.

U.S. trade policy is now following similar contours to Trump's domestic deregulatory agenda, which again, only seeks to [benefit](#) Big Tech companies. This domestic agenda includes [tax breaks](#) and [dropping dozens of enforcement actions](#), crippling crucial consumer protection organizations such as the [Federal Trade Commission](#) and [Consumer Financial Protection Bureau](#), and attempts to [introduce legislation](#) that would ensure that Big Tech cannot be held accountable to the public.

President Trump's trade policy should therefore be seen for what it is — a policy that aims solely at further enrichment of Big Tech billionaires — at the cost of crucial public interest regulation that could make our digital ecosystems safer and fairer.