



## Free trade retreat not in the nation's best interest

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In keeping with the vision he outlined as a candidate, President Donald Trump has begun using his executive power to retreat from free trade. Unfortunately for American workers, the strategy will detract from what Trump has set as his top priority — growing and protecting American jobs.

On Monday, Trump officially killed the nation's participation in the Trans-Pacific Partnership deal, issuing an executive order withdrawing the United States from the pact. It also effectively ended his predecessor's "pivot to Asia" strategy, a policy aimed at strengthening U.S. economic ties to free countries in the region, while at the same time countering Chinese influence.

Instead, the new president is choosing to cede the field to China when it comes to developing markets in the region that has the Earth's fastest growing economies. China is already involved in negotiations for a multilateral trade deal called the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership. TPP had stalled China's efforts. With U.S. withdrawal, TPP is no longer viable and Asia-Pacific countries will move toward a new partner, if not their preferred one.

This newspaper consistently supported the TPP deal as good for the country, strategically and economically. But congressional approval stood in the way of the 12-nation agreement that included Australia, Vietnam, Singapore, Japan and Malaysia.

Resistance came primarily from President Obama's own party, the Democrats. Republicans, despite their free-trade instincts, were unwilling to throw Obama a lifeline.

In the recent presidential campaign, TPP came under attack. Both Trump and Vermont Sen. Bernie Sanders, who had sought the Democratic nomination, made their disdain for the deal a centerpiece of populist campaigns. They argued the deal would mean the loss of U.S. jobs, displaced by cheap Asian labor.

Most depressingly, the eventual Democratic nominee, Hillary Clinton, her finger to the populist wind, abandoned her long and strong support for the Asian trade agreement and decided it was not a good deal after all.

The facts say otherwise. It was not a perfect deal for the U.S. No multilateral agreement will ever provide that. Various countries got special treatment on various economic matters. On balance, however, the experts who looked at it concluded it would be good for American jobs and the domestic economy.

Support ranged from the hard-right CATO Institute, which said it would "increase our economic freedoms," to the left-leaning Brookings Institution, which said TPP would "create new

opportunities for U.S. exporters in areas where barriers remain high, such as in agriculture, services, and high-end manufacturing.”

According to the Peterson Institute for International Economics, if implemented TPP would have “result(ed) in additional U.S. real national income of \$131 billion annually by 2030 and ... grow(n) U.S. exports each year by \$357 billion by 2030.” Its analysis also concluded the deal would have meant income growth and higher wages for American workers.

The Semiconductor Industry Association called the deal “incredibly important to our industry” because it would lift rules preventing the U.S. from accessing Asian markets.

Trump says his plan is to seek unilateral deals, country by country, that will better protect U.S. interests. That reverses the trading strategies of successive administrations, Democrat and Republican. But Trump, never lacking for confidence in the soundness of his own decision making, has apparently concluded he is right and all those earlier presidents were wrong.

The new president is preparing to show his deal-making skills by renegotiating the North American Free Trade Agreement with Mexico and Canada. Trump contends that the deal favors our neighbors and contributes to the trade deficit.

It is another case of the facts be damned. With the exception of oil and gas imports from those countries, helping feed this nation’s voracious energy demands, trade between the countries is fairly balanced, according to the Congressional Research Service. Our neighbors may well ask, “What, exactly, is Trump’s problem?”

If Trump turns his old-style protectionist rhetoric into policy — and that is starting — the net losers will be American workers and consumers. Perhaps Republican leaders in Congress, a party that has long backed open markets, can find the spine to confront the new titular head of the GOP on these issues.