

# NATIONAL REVIEW

## After TPP

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As expected, one of the first actions of the Trump administration has been to withdraw the United States from the Trans-Pacific Partnership, a proposed trade-liberalization pact among a dozen Pacific-facing powers including the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Japan, and Singapore — notably excluding China.

The retreat from TPP is regrettable inasmuch as the accord had many excellent features, paramount among them putting the United States and its humane democratic norms at the center of Pacific affairs rather than ceding that place to Beijing. But large, multi-lateral trade pacts are out of fashion just at the moment, not only with those who see global trade in roughly the same terms as Donald Trump but also among those who see it in roughly the same terms as Bernie Sanders — indeed, the two views are sometimes very difficult to distinguish.

Part of the case against TPP was the secrecy in which it was negotiated. Similar international accords have long been negotiated under similar conditions of discretion, which is intended to facilitate a greater degree of openness and cooperation among those engaged in the negotiations. But national governments and international institutions ranging from the European Union to the World Trade Organization are in bad odor at present, and trust in them is very low. The rejection of TPP is only in part about the autarkic fantasies of the world's populists and nationalists; it is also an understandable call for greater transparency in the development of global economic arrangements. Future accords probably will have to be negotiated with a much higher degree of openness to the general public or face similar debilitating suspicion. That will mean, among other things, longer timelines for the elected representatives and media of member states to review final documents, and more openness on the part of national governments as to the specific choices under consideration.

While multilateral trade deals are currently unpopular, there is a bit of a vogue for bilateral trade pacts, which are seen as simpler and more tractable. And, indeed, there is much to be said for them. But the complexity of multilateral deals will be present in bilateral deals, too, because trade is inherently complex. Consider a simple question: Does “free trade” mean that governments are forbidden to discriminate against overseas providers and contractors when it comes to military projects, or are they free to privilege domestic firms out of national-security concerns? However one answers that question, the answer is going to add a dozen pages or more to any trade deal, bilateral or multilateral. Ten thousand other similar questions will have similar effects, which is why trade deals end up looking like the *Encyclopedia Britannica* instead of the Declaration of Independence. While it certainly would be desirable to deepen our bilateral trade ties as the United Kingdom exits the European Union and to facilitate freer trade between the United States and India, the instruments establishing those more liberal relationships will be as complex as TPP if they are effective, robust, and reasonably complete.

And while TPP or a similar accord would have represented a significant elevation of the American role in Asian-Pacific affairs, achieving similar results with piecemeal bilateral agreements will be much more difficult, if it is possible at all.

We do not share the Trump administration's reflexive hostility toward international trade, because we do not share its belief that Americans are necessarily being victimized by overseas producers and traders who go to extraordinary lengths to bring the produce of human ingenuity and effort to Americans' doorsteps at reasonable prices — indeed, the opposite is closer to the truth. But we do share the conviction that trade accords should be entered into with open eyes and a firm grasp of the national interest.

In Donald Trump's view, TPP did not satisfy the criterion of national interest. We will be interested in seeing what sort of instrument does satisfy it. In trade as in peacekeeping, the absence of American leadership leaves a vacuum that will not remain unfilled for very long.