

BEYOND THE BOTTOM LINE: UNDERSTANDING TARIFFS THROUGH A BORDER STUDIES LENS

A Eur-Asian Border Lab Policy Paper



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Key messages

- Tariffs are not merely economic tools; they function as symbolic and social instruments, shaping identity, mobility, and state authority.
- Trade disputes can generate cultural, political, and regional effects that extend beyond immediate fiscal outcomes.
- Policymakers should anticipate these broader consequences and consider complementary tools, including negotiation, coalition-building, and domestic support.

Keywords: Tariffs; Border Studies; Trade Policy; Non-Tariff Barriers; Cross-Border Governance

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Overview

As the United States imposes sweeping new tariffs on a range of imports – including those from European allies — fears of a global trade war are rising. With rising costs, fraying supply chains, and threats to longstanding international agreements, the stakes are high. Yet tariffs are only the tip of the iceberg. This brief takes a broad view, examining how tariffs and related trade mechanisms function as *bordering practices* – shaping national identity, mobility, and security in addition to economic flows. By applying a border studies lens to current developments, this brief offers insights for policymakers and practitioners seeking to anticipate risks, improve policy coherence, and design effective interventions in an increasingly anxious global environment.

What are tariffs, and why do they matter now?



Put simply, a tariff is a tax imposed on imported goods - a type of duty applied at the border. While ‘tariff’ and ‘duty’ are often used interchangeably, tariffs specifically refer to taxes on cross-border trade, whereas duties can also include internal taxes like excise charges. Tariffs typically have the effect of making foreign goods more expensive (and therefore less competitive) for domestic consumers (Fajgelbaum et al 2020). Governments typically use tariffs to protect domestic industries, raise revenue, or gain leverage in trade negotiations. However, conventional economic analysis often focuses on these fiscal and market impacts, overlooking the broader social, political, and symbolic consequences that a border studies perspective brings into view. This brief, then, does not aim to model or evaluate the economic efficiency of these policies. Rather, it foregrounds the less-visible sociopolitical consequences that can emerge alongside fiscal and trade effects – a perspective especially relevant for practitioners managing policy coherence at national borders.

In the EU, tariffs are framed primarily as technical instruments of market governance. The bloc’s Common Customs Tariff applies uniformly across Member States, and it’s presented as a neutral mechanism that enables frictionless trade within the Union while shielding internal markets from external competition (European Commission 2025). Because EU tariffs are centrally managed and bound by WTO rules, they often appear depoliticised. Yet, this framing obscures the deeper political and social work tariffs perform. In other contexts, tariffs are presented as symbols of national sovereignty and control. Politicians frame them as ways to defend domestic production, preserve national culture, or retaliate against perceived external threats.

This rhetoric is not new: tariffs have played a role in nationalist and protectionist trade conflicts since at least the 19th century – from China’s efforts to maintain customs sovereignty during the Opium Wars, to the United States’ Smoot-Hawley Act during the Great Depression (Irwin 1996). In recent years, populist figures like Donald Trump have used tariff threats to coerce trading partners, punish rivals, and signal geopolitical strength.

These cases reveal another layer to how tariffs operate: they construct difference, demarcating what (or who) is seen as a risk to the domestic economy. Moreover, tariffs exemplify the state’s authority to regulate the flow of goods, people, and – in a more abstract sense – cultural values. For example, while they don’t qualify as fiscal tariffs, Canada and France have implemented cultural protection measures – such as content quotas and restrictions on foreign media ownership – that function as *de facto* borders around national identity and cultural space (Marsh & Harvey 2015; Kyle & Niu 2017).

Furthermore, insights from border studies show that the methods used to regulate goods often mirror how states regulate people: both involve processes of filtering, categorising, inspecting, and sometimes excluding entry (Brambilla 2015). Recent research has shown strong correlations between restrictive trade policies and restrictive immigration policies (Suesse 2023; Joppke 2024), suggesting shared political narratives and drivers. Consequently, shifts in tariff policy rarely occur in isolation: they trigger changes in customs procedures, infrastructure, and



local perceptions of who belongs where and why.

Case Study 1: Boycotts and borderland identity in the US-Canada tariff dispute

The recent escalation in trade tensions between the United States and Canada offers a compelling illustration of how tariffs can produce cultural and symbolic effects that extend far beyond their intended economic impact. In early 2025, following the imposition of blanket US tariffs on Canadian goods – covering nearly all imported products – Canada responded with retaliatory measures and a wave of consumer-driven backlash.

Across Canada, citizens began boycotting US goods, cancelling travel to the United States, and encouraging the purchase of Canadian alternatives (Beaumont 2025). The boycott gained traction on social media, where hashtags like #ShopLocalCanada and #MadeInCanada reflected growing resentment toward US trade policy and broader cross-border frustration (Panetta 2025). Cafés replaced US-sourced coffee beans, grocery stores relabelled products to highlight Canadian origins, and cultural institutions pulled out of bilateral exchange programmes.

The tariff conflict has reconfigured local consumer choices into acts of political alignment. Across Canada, consumer sentiment shifted, resulting in significant declines in cross-border shopping and tourism reported by US border towns like Sumas, WA, and Niagara Falls, NY (Buckley 2025). This ‘boycott effect’ stemmed partly from rising anti-American sentiment, a trend that has worried many US businesses. In the Fraser Valley region – which straddles the Washington-British Columbia border – US residents expressed frustration with federal policy. Some reported feeling a stronger connection to their cross-border regional

identity than to their American nationality (Ronnell 2025). This ongoing trade dispute offers a vivid example of how tariffs can shape lived experiences in borderlands – drawing new cultural divisions and, in some cases, facilitating regional solidarities that challenge the neatness of national boundaries. For policymakers, the case illustrates how tariff disputes can trigger long-term damage to cross-border trust and commercial flows.

While the US-Canada dispute highlights the socio-cultural impacts of direct tariff imposition, the complexities of altering trade relationships extend beyond tariffs alone. Other forms of bordering practices – including non-tariff barriers (NTBs) like regulatory checks and customs formalities – can generate similarly profound consequences. Though they do not necessarily involve taxes, such measures often create comparable frictions at the border, altering trade flows, mobility, and identity in much the same way as tariffs. The UK's post-Brexit experience provides a vivid example.

Case Study 2: Brexit and the Northern Ireland protocol

The UK's pursuit of trade autonomy after Brexit was intended to be a clear signal of regained sovereignty. However, separating from the EU customs union and single market exposed the practical and political complexity of redrawing trade borders. One key challenge was the status of the land border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland. The Good Friday Agreement (1998) – a peace accord that cooled decades of sectarian conflict – relied on the removal of visible border infrastructure, such as military checkpoints, customs posts, and surveillance towers, to support cross-border cooperation and political stability. The resulting compromise for Brexit, the Northern Ireland Protocol (NIP), kept Northern Ireland aligned with

certain EU customs and regulatory rules, creating a complex regulatory border in the Irish Sea (Centre for European Policy Studies 2021). While the NIP avoided reinstating hard infrastructure along the land border, it introduced new inspection facilities at ports like Larne and Belfast — effectively relocating, rather than eliminating, the visibility of customs enforcement.

Brexit did not result in new tariffs *per se* — the UK-EU Trade and Cooperation Agreement ensures (for now) tariff-free trade between the two blocs. However, the NIP introduced significant barriers for goods moving from Great Britain to Northern Ireland. Shipments now require customs declarations, safety and security certificates, and, for certain goods, compliance with EU standards. Agri-food products, including meat, dairy, and plants, necessitate veterinary health certificates, inspections at ports, and pre-notification of arrivals. The resulting burden — particularly on small and medium-sized businesses — has led to significantly increased operating costs, shipment delays, and supply chain fragmentation (Bakker et al 2022; Graziano et al 2023). Politically, the NIP also sparked backlash from Unionist communities in Northern Ireland, many of whom saw the Irish Sea customs border as a threat to the UK's constitutional integrity.

Seen through a border studies lens, a paradox emerges: the UK's attempt to assert full control over its economic market has created new regulatory and social borders within its territory. While some aspects of this case are specific to the Brexit context, they reflect a broader principle: when trade regimes are redrawn, borders are too — institutionally, spatially, and symbolically.

Putting the border lens to work: Practical insights for practitioners

So, how can this border studies perspective help policymakers, politicians, and state

officials navigate trade policies more effectively? By moving beyond purely economic metrics, this lens offers several critical insights:

1. *Anticipate broader consequences:* Practitioners should assess not just impacts on GDP or trade volumes, but also the potential symbolic, political, and spatial effects of tariffs and similar customs restrictions. These policies may fuel 'us vs. them' narratives or strengthen regional identities over national ones.
2. *Recognise the 'border web':* Tariffs interact with a complex web of other bordering mechanisms — customs procedures, non-tariff barriers, migration controls, and security infrastructure. Ensuring coherence across these domains helps prevent contradictions and unintended consequences.
3. *Scrutinise the narrative:* The justification for tariffs — whether framed around economic fairness, national security, or retaliation — is itself a powerful political tool. Practitioners should critically examine the stated rationale against the likely broader impacts. Is the tariff primarily an economic lever, a security measure, a diplomatic signal, or a performance of sovereignty? Understanding the underlying political work the tariff is doing is crucial for predicting possible reactions and designing effective responses.

Because tariffs are blunt instruments that simultaneously raise consumer prices and shield producers, economists often argue for more targeted tools. For instance, if the sole

goal is to support domestic industry, a direct production subsidy can achieve this without distorting consumer prices. Even when faced with tariffs imposed by trading partners,

policymakers can consider strategies beyond immediate tariff-for-tariff retaliation. Several of these strategies are detailed in the table below.

Table 1: *Alternative State Responses to Trade Friction*

Strategy	What It Does (Border Studies Framing)
Formal Dispute Settlement Mechanisms (e.g., via the WTO)	Utilises international rules and legal frameworks to address the border dispute and regulate state behaviour.
Direct Bilateral/Multilateral Negotiations	Employs diplomacy and dialogue to directly reshape border relations and potentially adjust controls.
Building Coalitions with Other Affected Nations	Changes the scale and political dynamics of the cross-border dispute beyond a purely bilateral interaction.
Domestic Support (e.g., subsidies to affected industries)	Focuses on mitigating the internal consequences of the friction occurring at the external border.

Conclusion

In a world that is economically globalised yet politically fragmented, tariffs and related trade policies must be recognised as more than technical instruments. These mechanisms actively reconfigure borders, influence political alignments, and stratify market access in unexpected ways. For researchers, policymakers, and practitioners, adopting a border studies perspective can provide a practical, flexible toolkit. It enables more risk-sensitive policy design, improved cross-sector coordination, and a more precise understanding of the communities and businesses navigating everyday border friction.

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