

Class Activity: U.S.–China Economic Relations and Foreign Policy

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1) Goal of the Activity

This activity examines how U.S.–China trade tensions reflect broader transformations in global political economy and foreign policy. Students will analyze how global supply chains, tariffs, and economic interdependence have reshaped state power and foreign policy decision-making. Using concrete examples such as the iPhone production chain and tariff disputes over steel and semiconductors, students will learn to connect economic structures to geopolitical strategy.

The main objectives are to help students:

- Understand how interdependence creates both leverage and vulnerability in international relations.
- Explain how trade and economic policy serve as instruments of foreign policy.
- Evaluate how China’s economic rise has challenged U.S. global leadership.

This activity ties into broader course themes on globalization, economic statecraft, and shifting world orders in the 21st century.

2) Prerequisites

Students should already be familiar with core concepts such as globalization, international trade and comparative advantage, and economic interdependence. Prior exposure to international institutions (WTO, IMF, World Bank) and theories of global political economy is recommended. No special tools are required; students will use online databases and publicly available data.

3) Pre-Class Activities

Students:

- **Reading:** Henry Farrell and Abraham L. Newman, “*Weaponized Interdependence: How Global Economic Networks Shape State Coercion*” (*Foreign Affairs*, 2023).
- **Research:** Trace China’s economic rise since the 1990s and identify three key turning points (e.g., WTO accession, Belt and Road Initiative, Made in China 2025). See for instance [here](#).
- **Preparation:** Bring one example of a U.S. tariff on a Chinese product and a brief note on its rationale or impact, see for instance [here](#) or [here](#) .

Instructor:

- Prepare a short lecture (10–15 minutes) summarizing key developments in U.S.–China economic relations since the end of the Cold War.
- Show *The Problem with the iPhone Supply Chain* segment from *The Problem with Jon Stewart* to illustrate interdependence and vulnerability in production networks.
- Prepare a slide summarizing top traded goods between the U.S. and China and recent tariff data.

4) In-Class Activities: “The iPhone as Foreign Policy”

Phase 1 – Mini-Lecture and Framing (10 minutes)

Instructor revisits Farrell & Newman’s argument about “weaponized interdependence,” linking it to real-world examples of how the U.S. and China use economic networks as tools of coercion and diplomacy.

Phase 2 – Group Research and Mapping (25 minutes)

Students form small groups (3–4) and choose one product or sector (steel, semiconductors, soybeans, or iPhones).

Tasks:

- Trace the product’s global supply chain: R&D, components production, assembly, marketing and sales. Put especial emphasis on the geographic location of these activities.
- Identify key actors (governments, firms) controlling each phase.
- Discuss how tariffs, importing quotas, or economic sanctions affect those relationships.

Phase 3 – Discussion and Synthesis (20 minutes)

Groups share findings, with the instructor moderating discussion using guiding questions:

- How do trade policies reflect broader foreign policy objectives?
- In what ways can global supply chains be used as instruments of coercion or influence?
- What does the U.S.–China trade war reveal about the limits of globalization and ascent of nationalism in economic policies?

5) Post-Class Activities and Assessment

Activity:

Students create a visual map (digital or hand-drawn) of a selected product’s global supply chain, labeling key companies, countries, and costs. They must include a brief paragraph connecting their case to U.S.–China foreign policy dynamics.

Assessment:

- **Formative:** Group participation and discussion (in-class feedback).
- **Summative:** Supply chain map and paragraph (graded for clarity, accuracy, and analytical depth).

6) Materials

- Henry Farrell and Abraham L. Newman, “*Weaponized Interdependence: How Global Economic Networks Shape State Coercion*” (*Foreign Affairs*, 2023).
- *The Problem with the iPhone Supply Chain* segment from *The Problem with Jon Stewart*.
- Instructor slides on U.S.–China tariffs and trade flows.
- Optional: WTO and IMF data portals for student research.

7) Learning Goals

By the end of the activity, students will be able to:

- Explain how economic interdependence shapes U.S. and Chinese foreign policy strategies.
- Analyze trade and supply chains as instruments of power and diplomacy.
- Evaluate how globalization has transformed sovereignty and economic security.
- Apply theoretical frameworks of international political economy to contemporary U.S.–China relations.