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| Title | To Reduce Trade Deficit, White House Wants Partners to Buy American |
| Source | THE WALL STREET JOURNAL |
| Author(s) | Bob Davis |
| Published/Uploaded | March 8, 2017 7:51 p.m. ET |
| URL | https://www.wsj.com/articles/to-reduce-trade-deficit-white-house-wants-partners-to-buy-american-1489020691 |
| Total Images | 2 |
| Total Videos | 1 |
| Total Ext. Links | 8 |
| Total Items Comprising the Sample | 1 |
| Total Word Count | 519 |
| Contributor | DD |

The Trump administration plans to press Japan, Germany and other nations with which the U.S. has large trade deficits, to buy more U.S.-made commercial and military products as a way to boost jobs and reduce the nation’s $500 billion trade deficit.

“Any country we have a significant trade deficit with needs to work with us on a product-by-product and sector-by-sector level to reduce that deficit over a specified period of time,” Peter Navarro, director of the White House’s National Trade Council, said in an interview with The Wall Street Journal. “That can be achieved, if they buy more of our products than they now are buying from the rest of the world, whether it’s chemicals or corn or whether, from a national security perspective, it’s submarines or aircraft.”

Mr. Navarro said the push for more sales would come as part of bilateral trade deals with countries like Japan, or in separate trade negotiations with countries like Germany, whose trade relations are handled by the European Union. “I don’t see why we can’t have bilateral discussions with Germany about how we can rebalance our trade,” he said.

The White House trade official declined to discuss China, which runs the largest bilateral trade deficit with the U.S., but it’s clear that Beijing is on the administration’s mind too. In a speech Monday at the National Association for Business Economics in Washington, D.C., Mr. Navarro referred to China as “Communist China” and discussed a “rapidly militarizing strategic rival intent on hegemony in Asia, and perhaps world hegemony”—a description that fits China.

Even if the U.S. trade deficit declines, that doesn’t necessarily mean economic growth will rise. Japan ran trade surpluses when its economy barely grew in the late 1990s and 2000s. The U.S., on the other hand, grew robustly in the late 1990s with large trade deficits.

Former Clinton administration Treasury Secretary Lawrence Summers said he worried that an overarching focus on trade deficits could hurt U.S. exports by magnifying trade frictions with other nations.

Mr. Navarro is a former business professor at the University of California at Irvine, where he was known for jeremiads against China, including the books “Death by China” and “Crouching Tiger: What China’s Militarism Means for the World.” He had little experience in bureaucratic infighting.

One of the council’s main tasks is to help create a model trade agreement which can be used as a template for negotiations involving Mexico, as part of renegotiations of the North American Free Trade Agreement, and other nations.

After Mr. Trump [pulled out of the Trans-Pacific Partnership](https://www.wsj.com/articles/trump-withdraws-u-s-from-trans-pacific-partnership-1485191020), a trade pact of a dozen Pacific Rim nations, including Japan, the administration began considering a bilateral deal with Japan. Last year, the U.S. ran a $68.9 billion merchandise trade deficit with Japan.

Phil Levy, a senior fellow at the Chicago Council on Global Affairs, said Mr. Navarro’s plans would tend to strengthen the dollar, which would undermine efforts to reduce the trade deficit. They would also send the wrong signals to trading partners—that the U.S. wants foreign governments to pressure their companies to buy U.S. goods, whether or not that makes economic sense.