Going International 2026

Special analysis of the burdens on German companies as a result of trade tensions with the United States

DIHK German Chamber of Commerce and Industry

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Imprint

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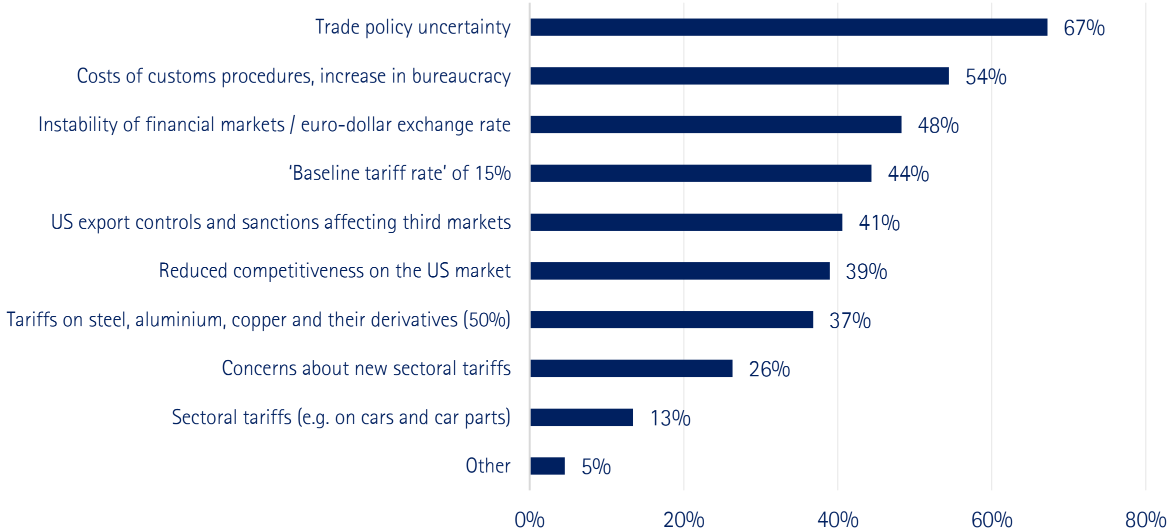
As of March 2025

Pressures resulting from trade tensions with the USA

Just under a year after "Liberation Day" and the announcements of high tariffs on close to all of the United States' trading partners, trade tensions with the US have increased worldwide. As its most important export market, the United States is increasingly becoming a risk factor for the export oriented German economy. This is particularly evident in the significant deterioration in current business levels and the drastic cuts in business expectations for the coming year: while business prospects in the rest of the world slightly brighten the outlook for business in the US once again faces large clouds.

The burdens resulting from trade tensions with the US are considerable for companies with US business. The volatility caused by the announcement of constantly evolving trade policy measures against key trading partners makes the situation unpredictable for German companies exporting across the Atlantic – little has changed in this respect compared to last year. Against the backdrop of the US Supreme Court's ruling of 20 February 2026, which declared one of the primary legal foundations of US tariff policy to be illegal, uncertainty has increased once again. There is no sign of the situation calming down: new tariff measures and investigations are being initiated, and it remains unclear whether the tariffs levied to date can be refunded. Trade policy uncertainty seems greater than ever. Even before these announcements, more than two-thirds of German companies reported that trade policy uncertainty was affecting their business activities. The lack of predictability is clearly weighing on business in and with the US.

What do companies see as the greatest burdens on their business activities as a result of trade tensions with the US? (in per cent, multiple answers possible, figures refer to companies that feel the burden (17% feel no burden))



More than half (54 per cent) of respondents cite customs costs and bureaucracy as a burden on US business. It should be noted here that the US frequently accuses the EU of excessive bureaucracy when importing goods and services. The fact that the US is now receiving the same criticism shows how its tariff policies is making its market less attractive to German companies. The bureaucratic requirements of sectoral tariffs on steel and aluminium play a particularly important role here. The wide range of tariff rates and the administrative complexities involved in determining the value and origin of steel and aluminium components are among the most impactful burdens. At the same time, the changing legal basis of US tariff policy is leading to additional bureaucratic efforts for companies.

Almost half of the companies surveyed are suffering from the instability of the financial markets and the volatile euro-dollar exchange rate, as their exports are becoming increasingly uncompetitive due to the strong euro and their margins in US business are shrinking. The baseline tariff rate of 15 per cent, which was previously levied under the *International Emergency Economic Powers Act (IEEPA)* and is now partly levied on an alternative legal basis, is seen by 44 per cent of companies as a burden on their US business. The fact that this baseline tariff rate is only cited as the fourth-largest burden on companies in their US business illustrates how strongly the effects of trade policy uncertainty and the increase in bureaucracy due to US trade policy are hampering bilateral trade.

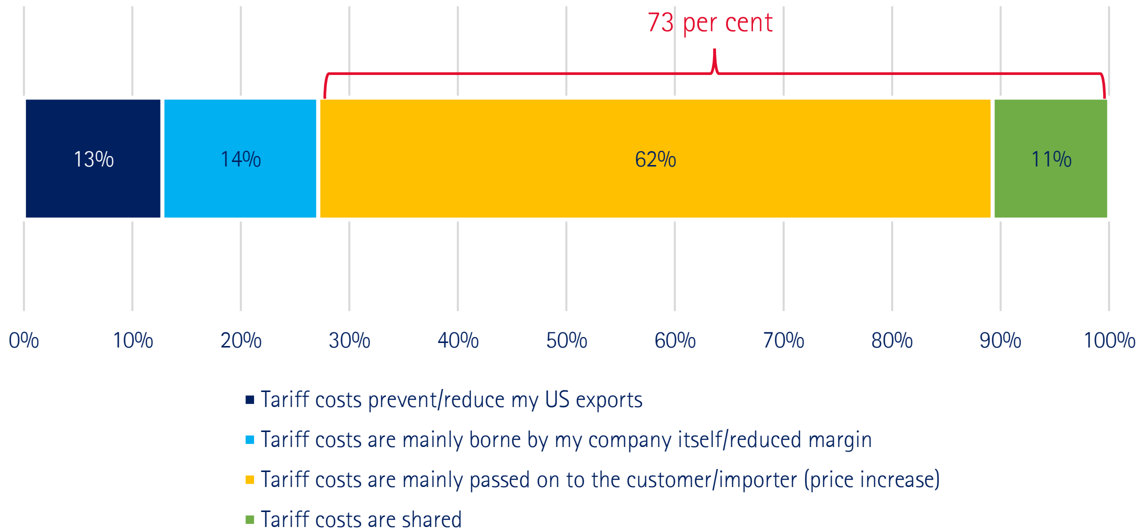
Export controls and sanctions imposed by the US government affecting third markets (41 per cent) are a burden for as many companies as is reduced competitiveness in the US market (39 per cent). Sectoral tariffs under Section 232 generally only affect certain industries. Nevertheless, slightly more than one in three companies perceive sectoral tariffs on steel and aluminium and their derivatives as a burden (37 per cent). Among mechanical engineering companies, as many as 62 per cent feel that these sectoral tariffs are a burden on their US business. A total of 26 per cent remain concerned about new sectoral tariffs. As a result of the latest trade policy measures taken by the US administration, it is to be expected that these investigations will continue to increase in scope and scale. Sectoral tariffs on cars and car parts, as well as on kitchen and bathroom furniture, are a concern for 13 per cent of companies.

Additionally, individual companies cite the high shipping costs for small shipments to the US, which have risen following the abolition of the de minimis allowances for small shipments, declining competitiveness in the US and a complete withdrawal from the US market as further burdens as a result of trade tensions with the US.

The companies' response to the tariff costs is clear: 73 per cent of the tariff costs are being passed on to US customers in full or at least in part. This confirms the latest findings of various economic institutes, which show that the costs of US tariffs are primarily borne by American companies and consumers. However, the demand for imported products is falling as US customers now have to pay higher prices. The price increase is caused by US import duties on German products, which are added when the products are imported. For 13 per cent of companies, the higher costs as a result of tariffs are reducing or preventing their exports to the US.

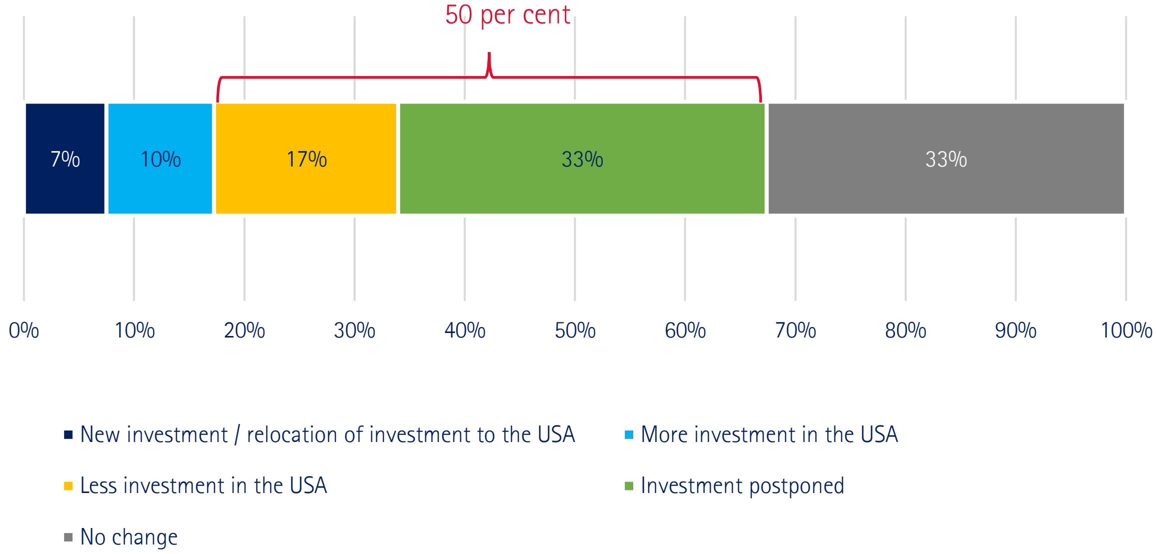
Who bears the costs of the increased US tariffs?

(The figures refer to companies with US export business)



How does the current US tariff policy affect your investment plans in the US?

(Only companies with US business)



A key objective of the current US Administration's trade policy is to strengthen the American economy and reduce trade deficits with other countries by imposing high import duties. The hope that this would also attract more production and thus investment to the US does not seem to have materialised so far. On the contrary, half of the companies with US operations say that they intend to reduce their investments or postpone existing investment plans in the US. Only seven per cent of companies plan to start new investments or relocate investments to the US. Only ten per cent of companies plan to expand their investments in the US. While the current tariff policy is prompting individual companies to invest more in the US, both the current tariff levels as well as the ongoing trade policy uncertainty are causing the majority of companies to be very cautious about investing in the US market. Even the agreement between the EU and the US in the summer of 2025 was not enough to provide the planning security needed to overcome this reluctance to invest.

Questionnaire

What do you see as the biggest burdens on your business activities as a result of trade tensions with the US? (Multiple answers possible)

- No burdens
- Trade policy uncertainty
- "Baseline tariff rate" of 15%
- Tariffs on steel, aluminium, copper and their derivatives (50%)
- Sectoral tariffs (on cars and car parts, kitchen and bathroom furniture, etc.)
- Concerns about new sectoral tariffs (pharmaceuticals, semiconductors, robotics and industrial machinery, etc.)
- Costs in customs procedures, increase in bureaucracy
- Instability of financial markets / euro-dollar exchange rate
- Export controls and sanctions imposed by the US government affecting third markets
- Reduced competitiveness on the US market
- Other (free text)

4.4. Who bears the costs of increased US tariffs? (Multiple answers possible)

- Not relevant/no US exports
- Customs costs prevent/reduce my US exports
- Customs costs are mainly borne by my company itself/reduced margin
- Customs costs are mainly passed on to the customer/importer (price increase)
- Customs costs are shared

4.5. How does the current US tariff policy affect your investment plans in the US? (Only companies with US business)

- Not relevant/no investments planned
- New investment/relocation of investment in the US
- More investments in the US
- Less investment in the US
- Investments postponed
- No change

Methodology

The DIHK special evaluation of the burdens on companies as a result of trade tensions with the USA is based on the nationwide survey "Going International 2026", which the DIHK conducted with the support of the 79 Chambers of Industry and Commerce (IHKs) in Germany. 2,400 companies based in Germany that are active abroad took part in the survey, which ran from 2 February to 13 February 2026.

The company responses are distributed by company size as follows: 77 per cent of companies with up to 249 employees, nine per cent with 250-499 employees, five per cent with 500-999 employees, and eight per cent with more than 1,000 employees.

Of the company responses, 55 per cent are industrial companies, three per cent are from the construction industry, 16 per cent are from the retail sector, 13 per cent are from the service sector, and 13 per cent are other.

The companies operate their international business as follows: 84 per cent export from Germany, 32 per cent have subsidiaries or branches abroad, 27 per cent import to Germany for sale, 16 per cent source abroad for production in Germany, 17 per cent maintain a representative office or sales office abroad, 17 per cent are independent cooperation partners, nine per cent have a joint venture/alliance, eight per cent have research and development, seven per cent are active abroad via e-commerce, four per cent have a transit trade and two per cent have a purchasing office abroad.