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Reduce, reuse, and reverse logistics

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The Chinese ban on imported waste has irrevocably changed the recycling and waste landscape. For years, the United States exported its waste — plastics, electronic waste (e-waste), and fibers — to China in the very same containers that imported goods and products from China's factories. This trade in waste is technically illegal under international law, but not under U.S. law. That disconnect came to a head in the summer of 2017, when China announced its National Sword policy, which was ostensibly a campaign to stop smuggling operations. That policy quickly morphed into a larger movement that incorporated another policy, known as "Green Fence," which focused on the quality of incoming loads of scrap material.

The resulting policy culminated in a ban on certain scrap material and a 0.5% contamination threshold for imports that waste exporters considered a de facto ban. U.S. exporters tried to alternatively send their waste to Southeast Asia, but Vietnam, Thailand and Malaysia soon followed China in instituting new customs checks and bans on scrap material. In March of this year, India announced it would prohibit scrap plastic, citing environmental concerns. Resource Recycling, Inc. has an informative timeline that follows the thread that began with Green Fence, merged with National Sword, and is now spreading across the developing world.

"The Chinese discovered that importing waste was in effect a net negative," said Jim Puckett, executive director of the Basel Action Network. "It has changed things tremendously."