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2026 Supply Chain Checklist:

How to Prepare for Tariffs, AI, and Geopolitical Uncertainty

Tariffs and turmoil: the new supply chain reality

As we head into 2026, supply chains continue to face relentless pressure as volatility refuses to subside, and it seems there's a surprise around every corner. Tariffs, global conflict, regulatory turmoil, and climate-related disruptions are driving an economy in constant flux, marked by unpredictable demand, fluctuating material costs, and elevated trade and operational risk.

Legacy systems can't keep up because they lack the speed, adaptability, and insight needed to meet contemporary realities and the demands of today's supply chain operations. Disconnected tools without real-time visibility lead to siloed data and slower, error-prone decisions with increased likelihood of costly mistakes. When you can't scale or adapt quickly, every disruption hits hard and recovery takes longer.

To remain competitive, your supply chain needs to anticipate shock and incorporate redundant mechanisms for resilience and agility. While that can sound daunting and challenging to implement, modern software that leverages AI and ML can help you harness the remarkable advancements being made with these technologies.

A smarter supply chain starts here with your 2026 checklist

This checklist highlights the strategies leading supply chain organizations are prioritizing to maintain their competitive advantage. From reevaluating supplier relationships to investing in forward-thinking technologies, each step is a move towards reducing cost, boosting resilience, and increasing long-term profitability.

Use these strategies as a benchmark to assess your current operations and identify the gaps that matter most to your organization.

Prepare for trade and supply disruption by diversifying supplier base

As is clear to all of us by now, supply chain shakeups aren't going to subside. Geopolitical tensions, sanctions, regulatory volatility, and climate risks continually converge for a potent mix of perpetual disruption.

In Q2 2025, 77% of supply chain leaders cited trade uncertainty as a top business concern for the second consecutive quarter. Diversifying your supplier base remains one of the most effective ways to reduce exposure and build resilience.

77%

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Avoid over-reliance on one region

When possible, onboard secondary and tertiary suppliers across geographies and invest in regional or nearshore partnerships. Mexico, Central America, and Canada can generally lower risk and lead times while sidestepping trade disruptions. While this strategy is perhaps not as reliable in the current political climate, it's still a useful hedge in the long run.

Develop alternate transportation modes

Consider costs and efficiencies of rail, air, and ocean transport, and how each aligns with your budget, sustainability goals, environmental regulations, and consumer demand. Explore alternative routes to ensure your products aren't delayed due to unforeseen roadblocks.

Monitor hotspots

Stay informed about current events in your supplier regions, implement rerouting playbooks for shipping lane disruptions, and keep emergency response teams in place to act quickly when disaster strikes.

Source: National Association of Manufacturers, https://nam.org/2025-second-quarter-manufacturers-outlook-survey/. Accessed July 2025.

Anticipate tariff uncertainty

Tariff rates will continue to oscillate throughout the rest of this year and into 2026, with effects likely becoming more prominent in 2026. Initial impacts are already evident in material costs, sourcing disruptions, and U.S. consumer spending. McKinsey reports that more than half of the consumers who have changed their spending habits due to tariffs have cut back on nonessential spending.

While organizations with tariff risk may not be able to fully eliminate their potential loss, there are still steps that can be taken to differentiate from competitors who will likely face similar exposure.

Build flexibility into sourcing & production

Design contracts and operational flows to quickly shift volumes between regions or suppliers as needed.

Consider onshore suppliers

Onshoring can be a complicated, long-term undertaking with ROI that's not always compelling, even in the face of tariffs. Depending on the specifics of your manufacturing and logistical chain, evaluate if the economies of onshoring are appropriate for your organization.

If the transition would come at some loss or net capital expenditure, it might still be worth pursuing to diffuse exposure and build diversity into your supply chain. At the very least, evaluate the feasibility of adding suppliers in multiple offshore regions, as we covered in the previous checkpoint.

Explore FTZs

Depending on your volume of imports and whether you re-export goods, Foreign Trade Zones (FTZs) may be an appropriate tool to minimize import tariffs. Secure, designated areas under U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) jurisdiction, FTZs are nonetheless treated as if they're outside of CBP territory. FTZs may defer, reduce, or eliminate duties, lower Merchandise Processing Fees, and soften quotas.

Track tariff negotiations

Tariff negotiations used to be long, slow-moving processes that rarely took industry by surprise. With that no longer the case, your team should remain abreast of the current, ever-evolving state of negotiations in regions with trading partners, as well as their upstream suppliers. After all, you can't respond proactively to tariffs that you don't see coming.

Source: McKinsey, https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/consumer-packaged-goods/our-insights/the-state-of-the-us-consumer. Accessed July 2025.

Strengthen inventory agility

From port closures to raw material shortages, strikes to tariff changes, unforeseen turbulence will continue to affect the supply chain in 2026. To minimize disruption and costly delays, robust inventory management is essential.

Maintain more buffer inventory

Extra inventory can help absorb short- to medium-term fluctuations and promote pricing and profit stability. Consumers are already frustrated with ever-increasing prices and inflation, so raise prices but only when necessary due to untenable profit strain.

Consider segmented inventory strategies by product

Not all your products are the same and each will have differing exposures to external factors, so segment and tailor your strategies based on a product's specific manufacturing and logistical cycle.

Utilize multi-location visibility

Track and monitor orders, inventory, and shipments throughout your supply chain in real-time so you know exactly where inventory sits across locations, and rebalance stock as needed.

Strengthen cross-functional coordination

Promote a collaborative internal staff culture by aligning procurement, sales, logistics, and finance around a shared inventory strategy. Coordinated response efforts promote smarter decision-making and help minimize costly miscommunication.

Use AI for smarter forecasting, smoother operation, and inventory optimization

If you're not incorporating AI and ML throughout your workflow, you're already running behind: according to Gartner, more than 80% of enterprises will use generative AI by 2026.

AI can consolidate and analyze millions of data points for split-second insights, recommendations, and alerts so your team can make quick, informed decisions at scale.

When buffer stock is not a necessity, AI can help reduce extraneous stock with predictive analysis, so you only hold the inventory you need, thereby reducing costs and improving working capital.

Perhaps most importantly, AI-powered tools can help ensure maximum fill rates by:

- Detecting demand shifts earlier
- Enabling real-time decision-making
- Identifying inventory distortions
- Automating alerts
- Anticipating rebalancing decision points faster

Source: Gartner, https://www.gartner.com/en/newsroom/press-releases/2023-10-11-gartner-says-more-than-80-percent-of-enterprises-will-have-used-generative-ai-apis-or-deployed-generative-ai-enabled-applications-by-2026. Accessed July 2025.

Harden cybersecurity and data resilience

The World Economic Forum found that 72% of survey respondents reported an increase in cyber risks in 2024—and cybersecurity threats continue to rise as malicious agents become more sophisticated, geopolitical turmoil persists, and supply chains become increasingly integrated.

As reported by our long-time partner, IBM, the global average cost of a data breach last year reached an all-time high of $4.88 million per incident. Attacks can halt operations, jeopardize consumer confidence, damage your brand and reputation, and cause upstream and downstream ripples across your distribution network.

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PER INCIDENT

Deepen cyber protection

- Invest in best-in-class security tools for your logistics, manufacturing, and transportation networks.
- Most cyberattacks are carried out through “social engineering” in which users are tricked into granting access or revealing sensitive information, so review processes regularly, train staff, and require a culture of security in all day-to-day operations.
- Publish rigid security requirements and audit third-party vendors and software for compliance.

Implement robust backup systems

Even the most secure systems can be compromised—and when they are, backup infrastructure will preserve day-to-day operations, safeguard data, and maintain customer trust. Verify backup systems periodically to ensure data integrity and the ability to restore quickly in case of disaster.

Sources: World Economic Forum, https://www.weforum.org/publications/global-cybersecurity-outlook-2025/. Accessed July 2025. IBM, https://www.ibm.com/thought-leadership/institute-business-value/en-us/report/2025-threat-intelligence-index. Accessed July 2025.

Automate for labor efficiency and empower workforce

In the face of labor shortages and rising wages, it's more important than ever to boost workforce efficiency and equip your team with the tools they need to succeed with maximum output and performance.

Improve workforce technology and training

- Robotics, autonomous forklifts, and overall process automation can help counter labor shortages while improving performance.
- The best technology won't be helpful if your people don't know how to use it. Prioritize comprehensive staff training and re-training on all new software, technology, and automation.
- Explore AI-powered order routing and fulfillment optimization to streamline operations.
- Promote cross-functional training and upskilling, and hire for diverse skill sets to create a versatile team that can adapt, collaborate, and maximize the value of your technology investments.

Strengthen regulatory and ESG compliance

The current political climate is largely moving towards less regulation and away from traditional Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG). Still, a large framework of national and regional regulations will continue to persist and evolve.

Unexpected regulations and political pressure can appear suddenly (e.g., encouraging the use of sugar vs. high-fructose corn syrup, and natural dyes vs. artificial coloring), and many consumers continue to prioritize brands who align with their ESG beliefs so organizations would be wise to continue prioritizing regulatory and ESG compliance.

Map regulatory risk across your network

Analyze where regulatory and ESG risk exists throughout your distribution chain, partner network, and corporate structure. By visualizing and flagging potential exposure, you can address issues proactively and avoid damaging your reputation, while strengthening your relationships with responsible partners.

Embrace digitalization

Digitize trade compliance processes and regulatory monitoring and integrate requirements into procurement criteria. If you're not already, implement a Global Trade Management (GTM) platform and ensure strong digital recordkeeping of all trade, sales, and purchasing.

Audit financial exposure

Between shipping route disruptions, tariffs, increased cost of goods, and precarious consumer demand, margins are clearly under constant pressure. But it's not enough to acknowledge that costs are up without auditing your full financial exposure, so you know exactly which areas are contributing most to expenses and thus require the most urgent mitigation.

Renegotiate supplier contracts

- Your suppliers are likely also facing cost pressures and may be raising prices in response. Make sure any cost increases are commensurate with the market and build in a routine vendor review process to ensure you're receiving the best price.
- If your organization has grown, leverage your buying power and renegotiate contracts to account for higher quantity purchases.

Consider revenue leakage and chargebacks

Account for hidden costs like revenue leakage, chargebacks, and billing disputes in your pricing strategy. Build in margin protection to offset these losses before they erode your profitability.

Reassess pricing

- Evaluate your cost structures as fuel charges, inflation, and supplier pricing continue to fluctuate.
- Adjust your service levels and pricing accordingly to protect margins and stay competitive.
- As we mentioned previously, consumers are wary of increased costs too, so when raising prices, communicate clearly and ensure they understand the value behind cost changes.

Increase end-to-end visibility

You can't fix what you can't see. Lack of visibility is one of the top causes of inefficiency, missed deliveries, excess cost, and delayed response to disruption. Fortunately, modern software makes it possible for supply chains to stitch together fragmented data sources for a real-time, unified, actionable view.

Upgrade software platforms

Conduct a review of your process flow to identify bottlenecks, which may still be using antiquated software or overly manual processes.

Look for platforms that use real-time tracking and predictive alerts, which can help you anticipate potential disruptions and delays.

Share data between suppliers, logistics, and sales teams so everyone is working from a single source of truth, thus minimizing errors due to data discrepancy or miscommunication.

Create shared visibility dashboards with key internal staff, partners, and customers to improve coordination, reduce shipment delays, and promote faster, smarter decisions.

Embrace tech disruption

Let's face it, supply chain and logistics haven't traditionally been at the forefront of adopting the latest technologies. Indeed, we often still stick to decades-old systems and processes. There is certainly value to this approach because, above all, stability is of prime importance when the entire nation depends on the reliable distribution of goods.

As disruptions such as Covid, shipping lane closures, and tariffs reveal, businesses will have to embrace the latest approaches and technologies to weather challenges and differentiate themselves from competitors. It's not a coincidence that a common refrain throughout this checklist has been to advocate for an embrace of technology and automation, while minimizing inefficient manual processes.

Foster a tech-first mindset

- The most successful companies will weave AI and a tech-first mindset throughout their culture and workforce.
- Encourage curiosity, experimentation, and continuous learning so that your team stays forward moving and feels empowered to champion tools that will boost productivity.

Connected, responsive, and profitable—with the right tools

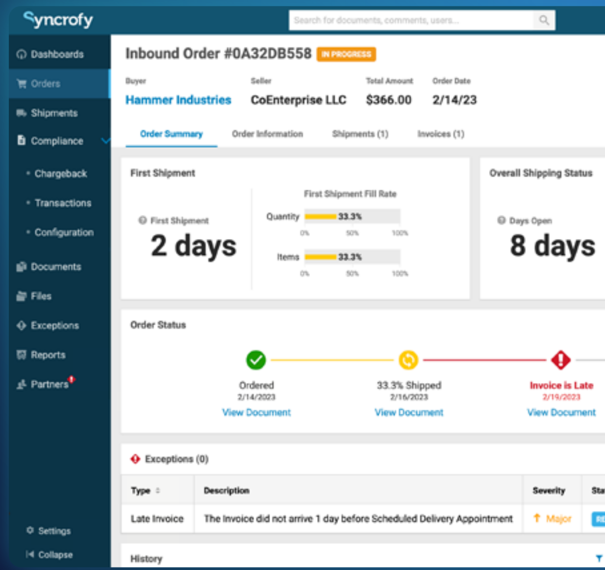
Today's most profitable supply chains aren't just efficient, they're flexible, data-driven, and risk-aware.

Each of these preceding checkpoints reflects a shift from reactive firefighting to strategic foresight. With a proactive mindset and modern, AI-enabled solutions, you can turn volatility into opportunity. When you're prepared to react faster than your competitors, you're more likely to avoid disruption and capture market share as your peers flounder.

Adaptability and resilience aren't optional—they're your competitive advantage. Either you lead, or you get left behind.

Prepare for tomorrow’s disruptions with today’s AI-powered software

Your supply chain deserves real-time transparency, built-in intelligence, and automation across networks. Syncrofy, “The AI-Enabled Supply Chain Platform,” is the only supply chain visibility platform providing full order lifecycle visibility down to the line-item level.



Accelerate decision-making

Powerful reporting and dashboards provide actionable insights.

Reduce complexity

Syncrofy acts as an agnostic tool uniting previously separate departments, systems, and vendors into a single platform where you can view all your EDI/B2B data in one place, resulting in a **78% increase in partner collaboration.**

Improve efficiency

Advanced Search lets you locate and view complex EDI data as easily readable business documents, resulting in **55% less time searching for documents.**

Reduce cost

Customized notifications and alerts help mitigate potential snags and instantly drive more IT bandwidth into your entire enterprise, resulting in a **30% reduction in revenue leakage and 30% reduction in chargebacks.**

Predict and prevent late shipments

Machine learning technology empowers you to anticipate shipment timelines to improve the efficiency of your supply chain and stay proactive.

AI-powered insights to predict and prevent late shipments

Combining a deep understanding of B2B processes, data formats, and order-to-cash/procure-to-pay flows, Syncrofy’s ML model accurately forecasts shipping dates and predicts late deliveries so you can view detailed reports, anticipate shipment timelines, and make data-driven decisions to improve efficiency and reliability.

Seamless integration with IBM B2B solutions

While built to integrate seamlessly with all EDI platforms, Syncrofy is a strategic IBM partner application that helps illuminate an IBM-managed supply chain. By consolidating B2B data across the enterprise in an easily readable format, Syncrofy enhances existing IBM B2B solutions such as Sterling, Gentran, B2Bi, and ITX.

Ready to fortify your supply chain for 2026?

Schedule a demo to unlock full visibility, cost savings, and supply chain resilience.

Syncrofy BY COENTERPRISE

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Created by CoEnterprise

CoEnterprise is a transformative, problem-solving enterprise software and services company. Founded in 2010, we are recognized as a leader in the supply chain and business analytics space, delivering innovative solutions and services that empower people with the resources to analyze their data to make faster, smarter decisions.

Fueled by our commitment to people and building lasting relationships, we've helped more than 800 customers on over 1,000 projects for some of the most recognized brands in the world—encompassing everything from data integration, to comprehensive analytics platforms, and migrations to the cloud.