By the time you see them in stores, most products have traveled around the
globe. Very few products come from just one place anymore. Even when a
label says “Made in China” or “Made in America,” it is not quite that simple.
These days, the majority of manufactured imports are bits and pieces of final
products. A steel frame for a bicycle, salt for packaged meats, a car engine.
And the story behind most of the finished products we buy in stores is a
globe-trotting journey. Along this ride, the item is designed, its materials are
sourced and put together, and then it gets shipped over and marketed,
ultimately allowing for the final price tag.

Take a Converse shoe. These sneakers are known for their all-American
look. But before a Converse shoe can make it to the shelves, it comes
together on the other side of the globe. Converse is owned by Nike, a huge
global corporation with a huge global supply network. Every element in the
classic Chuck Taylor sneaker has its own origin story. Most gum rubber,
which is used for soles, comes from Thailand, Indonesia, or Vietnam. The
cotton for the canvas often comes from China, South Korea, or Turkey.
Shoelaces can be crafted out of German polyester or Chinese nylon. Once
sourced, these pieces will typically be shipped to Vietnam for assembly.

Many companies make their shoes in Vietnam because the manufacturing
costs are low. In Vietnam, there are fewer rules about pollution and people
work in factories for less money. Once assembled, the shoes are shipped
more than eight thousand miles across the ocean to the Converse
distribution facility in Ontario, California. But before the Converse can
cross the border to the United States, Nike pays tariffs, taxes on
imported goods, to the U.S. government, raising prices for both Nike and
consumers. Once the shoes finally cross into the United States, they get sent
to malls, shoe stores, and directly to consumers. This global process lets Nike
sell products like the Converse All Stars for cheaper than they would be if
produced in just one place.

But there are hidden costs to global trade. The globe-spanning journeys of
products like Converse have massive environmental consequences. Twenty-
five to thirty percent of all greenhouse gas emissions are caused by
transporting goods around the world. Many would like to see Nike make
their products domestically, bringing jobs and industry to the United States.
But because most companies, like Nike, source materials from many
countries, tariffs against the cotton or the nylon from China, for example, could actually make American products more difficult and more expensive to produce. Plus, any increased costs taken on by Nike to assemble shoes in the United States instead of Vietnam will also make Converse more expensive. And higher costs would lead some to buy other shoes.

These trade-offs apply not only to shoes, but to cars, computers, and most everything that we use in modern life. Global trade makes products more accessible and connects consumers in one country to workers in another. Next time you lace up a new pair of sneaks, remember they have traveled thousands of miles around the world before you even take a step in them.