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THE FRAGMENTATION OF GLOBAL TRADE: FROM PROTECTIONISM TO GATED GLOBALIZATION

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ABSTRACT

The fragmentation of global trade, evolving from traditional protectionism to the modern paradigm of *gated globalization*, reflects a strategic shift by nations toward prioritizing sovereignty and security over multilateral cooperation. This paper examines the historical roots, theoretical underpinnings, and contemporary drivers geopolitical rivalry, economic insecurity, and social discontent behind this transformation. Through historical analysis and case studies of the U.S., EU, China, and emerging economies, the study reveals how policies such as tariffs, export controls, and regulatory fragmentation disrupt supply chains, inflate costs, and exacerbate inequality. Key findings indicate that while gated globalization addresses vulnerabilities like supply chain fragility, it risks entrenching economic divides and undermining global governance institutions. The paper underscores the urgency of balancing strategic autonomy with inclusive frameworks to preserve the benefits of economic interdependence. Recommendations include revitalizing multilateral institutions, fostering equitable trade agreements, and supporting small businesses to mitigate fragmentation's adverse effects. Ultimately, the research highlights the need for cooperative strategies to navigate the dual challenges of de-globalization and sustainable growth.

INTRODUCTION

Define global trade

Global trade is the purchase and sale of goods and services by companies in different countries. Consumer goods, raw materials, food, and machinery all are bought and sold in the international marketplace (Heakal, 2025). International trade is the backbone of globalization, has contributed significantly to reducing global poverty, lifting over a billion people out of poverty in recent decades. For instance, countries like China and Vietnam leveraged exports to fuel rapid economic growth, becoming manufacturing powerhouses (Rudge, 2024).

Global trade its importance in the modern economy.

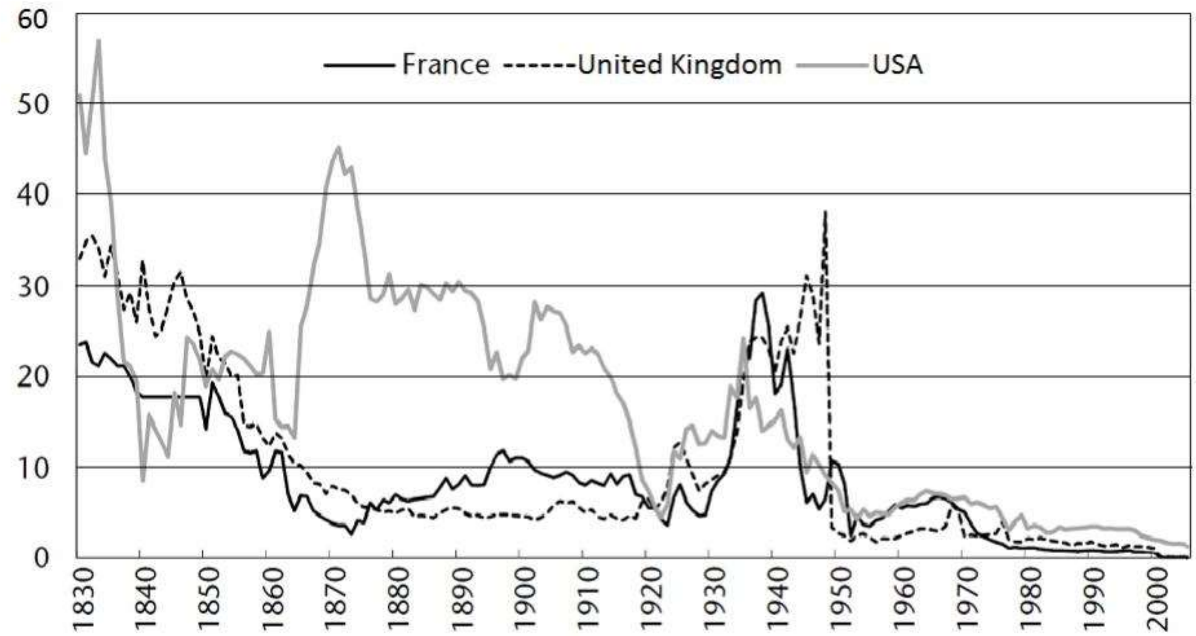
Historical Context of Protectionism

Protectionism is a policy of protecting domestic industries against foreign competition with the help of tariffs, subsidies, import quotas, or other restrictions or handicaps on foreign competition. (Duignan, 2025). Protectionism has a long and varied history working across different areas and during disparate periods of time (Sultana, Ahmed, & Imran, 2024; Khan, haq & Naseer, 2022). Governments were in the business of encouraging trade routes like the Silk Road and the Spice Route enabling these goods to get transferred from civilization centres in China, Europe and the Mediterranean. Nonetheless, between the late tenth and thirteenth centuries, China kept a close rein on maritime commodity trade by controlling exports, creating a small number of ports where trading took place, placing tariffs on imports, and regulating the purchase of imported goods (traded Chinese goods). There is no doubt that the relationship between Europe and the East was based on a regularity in trade. As an example, the Crusaders banned trade with the eastern Mediterranean while they conquered it and only after that did they open it to European shipping. (Encyclopedia, 2018). With the rise of nation-states in the 16th century, mercantilists added a proper analytical argument between winners and losers in trade and undertook protectionist measures to accumulate gold and silver for armies (Hanif, et al., 2021; Hanif, Naveed & Rehman, 2020). On the other hand, interest groups, war and recessions played a role in shaping the interest group ways of the mercantilists in Britain and Germany. In Britain, Thomas Mun (1571-1641), for example, director of the East Indian Company, has a state-supported monopoly in trading with India (Encyclopedia, 2018). Therefore, European trade policies of the 17th and 18th centuries (now discredited) became known as mercantilism– a policy aimed at minimum imports and maximum exports. Mercantilism wanted precious metals to happen to remain concentrated in a country (O'Sullivan, 2021). Additionally, from the late eighteenth century, as the winds of the protectionist belief of mercantilists were dying, the physiocrats gained preference (Feng, et al., 2023; Hafeez, et al., 2011). Adin Smith (1723–1790) and David Ricardo (1772–1823) revolted against the doctrine of the mercantilists that had been protectionist (Encyclopedia, 2018). Besides, England signed a trade and navigation treaty with France in the treaty on free trade in 1786. Protectionist sentiments were present. As just a single example, after signing a trade deal with the United Kingdom in 1786 French became discontented with the result because the undeveloped French industry was made to sell at a loss-making price in Britain and sentiment for protectionism in

France expanded (Nikolic, 2019). In the 19th century, such was the reaction of industrialists in Europe, that it produced a great impediment to free trade on the European continent. In the 1850s, English industries dominated the world industrial sector and were located mainly in the buoyant (O'Sullivan, 2021) frame of industries. Haq, Bilal, and Qureshi (2020) the idea of tariffs was proposed by Alexander Hamilton, who is one of the authors of the US Constitution, as one of the first treasury secretaries of America in 1789. According to Hamilton, "infant industries" needed to be protected from foreign competition between 1861 and 1933, the average US tariff on imports was 50 per cent, which was among the highest in the world (Schifferes, 2025); United States level, it could not be an overstatement to say that from 1866 to 1913, the United States was perhaps the most protectionist among the advanced countries (O'Sullivan, 2021). In addition, international trade barriers were built after the 1929 stock market crash (Nikolic, 2019). Examples include throughout the Great Depressions as many countries adopted protectionist measures through restricting international trade like the 1930 Smoot-Hawley Tariff (Fiveable, 2024). Many academic studies of the period in between the Civil War and the Great Depression, which are sometimes closed to have been a golden era of American tariffs and industrial prosperity, reveal protectionism to have hampered (Lincicome, 2017). The retaliatory tariffs by other nations followed the US and its introduction of tariffs on more than 20,000 goods, which were meant to prop up American industry (Nikolic, 2019). But other countries retaliated with their tariffs as there was a measure of extra money added to the prices of imported goods by high tariffs. The retaliation back and forth in this cycle led to a dramatic drop in global trade volume, economic conditions further deteriorating and growing unemployment in many nations. As a result, these protectionist actions also had a ripple effect affecting economies across the globe (Fiveable, 2024). Without a doubt, the 1930s and the rise of protectionism were also a cause of WWII (WWII) (O'Sullivan, 2021).

Figure 1. below shows these shifts in the protectionist sentiments of some of the major superpowers. As seems, that tariffs were put in Great Britain sharply lower after the 1840s, and sharply higher in the US after the American Civil War. As mentioned, Lincoln was passionately, protectionist and even imposed a tariff of 44 per cent during the war (Nikolic 2019).

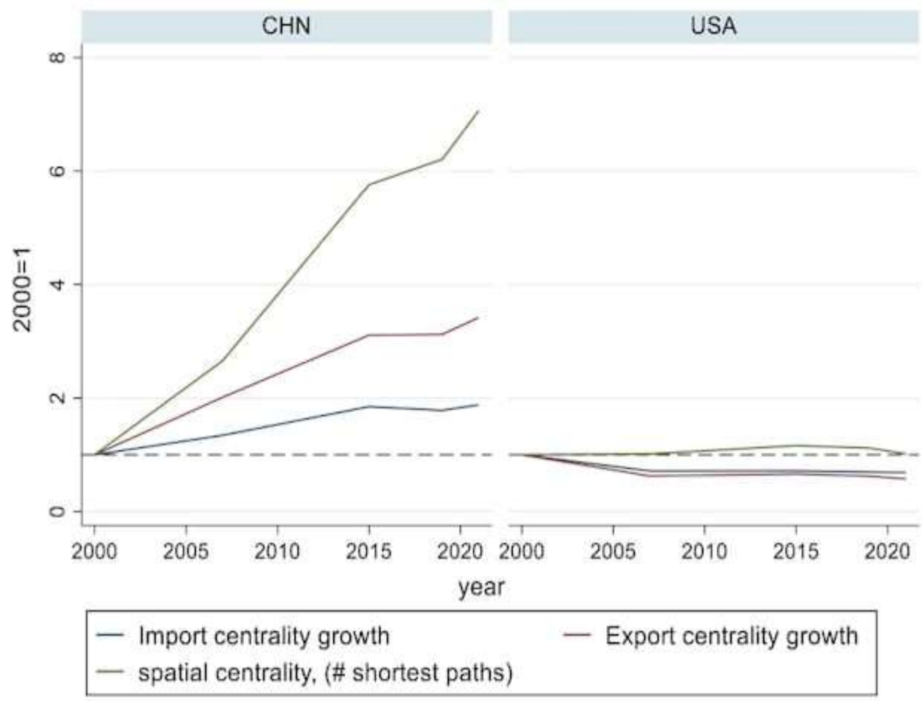
Figure 1: Average Tariff Rates on Total Imports, 1830-201



Sources: Imlah, Economic Elements

Since 1990, global trade has raised incomes by 24 percent for the world and 50 percent for the poorest 40 percent of the world. Almost 1 billion people have been lifted out of poverty with this growth. Trade has done its part to shape the world economy and deliver good socioeconomic derisks. World Bank Research Manager Daria Taglioni spoke recently at a Policy Research Talk in which she explained the fundamental transformations occurring in the global trading system, which are commensurate with patterns of industrial organization. Globalization is propelled toward maintaining these intertwined facets of the modern economy, economic complexity and interdependence, or, otherwise, toward deglobalization: regionalization, and reshoring. One of the most challenging terrains for trade policy of decades is preserving their benefits in terms of economic growth, poverty reduction, and technological innovation in an ever more fractured system of global economic governance. As an example, take the 2018-2019 US-China trade war that made a difference of about $450 billion in annual trade. Indeed, there were decreases in US exports to China and in China's exports to the US as expected. However, China’s importance to the global trade has only expanded (Figure 2).

Figure 2: The Growing Centrality of China in Global Trade



Source: World Bank. (2023, August 29).

These charts are calibrated to the year 2000 but compare the importance of China and the US to global trade over the past 20 years. The import centrality, export centrality and spatial centrality, a measure of which part of the world receives critical global trade, have all increased for China. Asia's emergence as an engine of global trade is closely tied to the marked increase in China's spatial centrality. Such protectionist measures are emerging. However, trade tensions and geopolitical challenges are making people ponder where demand for globalization is heading. Protectionism Is Failing to Achieve Its Goals and Threatens the Future of Critical Industries (The World Bank, 2023). This paper shows how global trade fragmentation takes place from the contemporary paradigm of gated globalization backed by geopolitical rivalries, economic insecurity and social discontent from traditional politicking (Shoaib, et al., 2024; Zainab, et al., 2023). In theory and based on historical trends, the paper demonstrates with theoretical frameworks and contemporary case studies (U.S., EU, China, emerging economies) that nations more and more opt for strategic autonomy over multilateral cooperation leading to supply chain disruption, breaking trust in global institutions and exacerbating inequality. It is to bring light to the historical and theoretical aspects involved in trade fragmentation, the political, economic and social factors that motivate gated globalization, and to offer alternative policy options for a balance between inclusive globalization of trade and sovereignty. The paper concludes with another big risk of de-globalization and that exit of the globalization is in dire need of coordinated strategies to minimize the risks of de-globalization while maximally upholding the benefits of economic interdependence.

2. Theoretical Framework

Concepts of Global Trade and Protectionism

Global trade is defined as the exchange of goods, services and capital among different countries for mutual benefit through specialization (Heakal, 2025). This allows countries to concentrate on the production of goods for which they have an efficiency advantage, thereby ensuring economic interdependence and increase. Through global trade, countries have been historically reduced in poverty and caused to integrate their economies, like the industrialization of countries such as China and Vietnam (Rudge, 2024). The basic principles of global trade include comparative advantage, resource allocation efficiency, and lower trade barriers helping to maximize collective welfare. On the other hand, protectionism is defined as policies aimed to safeguard national industries from foreign competition. They are tariffs, preferential tariffs, import quotas, subsidies, and regulatory barriers (Duignan, 2025). Protectionism is rooted in mercantilist ideology and seeks to protect jobs, nurture infant industries and ensure national security. For example, Alexander Hamilton's 18th-century tariffs were aimed at protecting emerging U.S. industries, while the Smoot-Hawley Tariff of 1930 contributed to implosion of the global trade in the Great Depression (Nikolic, 2019; Fiveable, 2024). Proponents of protectionist measures allege distortions of market efficiency, stimulate retaliatory measures, reduce innovation or otherwise stunt economic growth; an example being the trade wars of the 30s and the more recent U.S.-China tensions (Lincicome, 2017).

Theories of International Trade

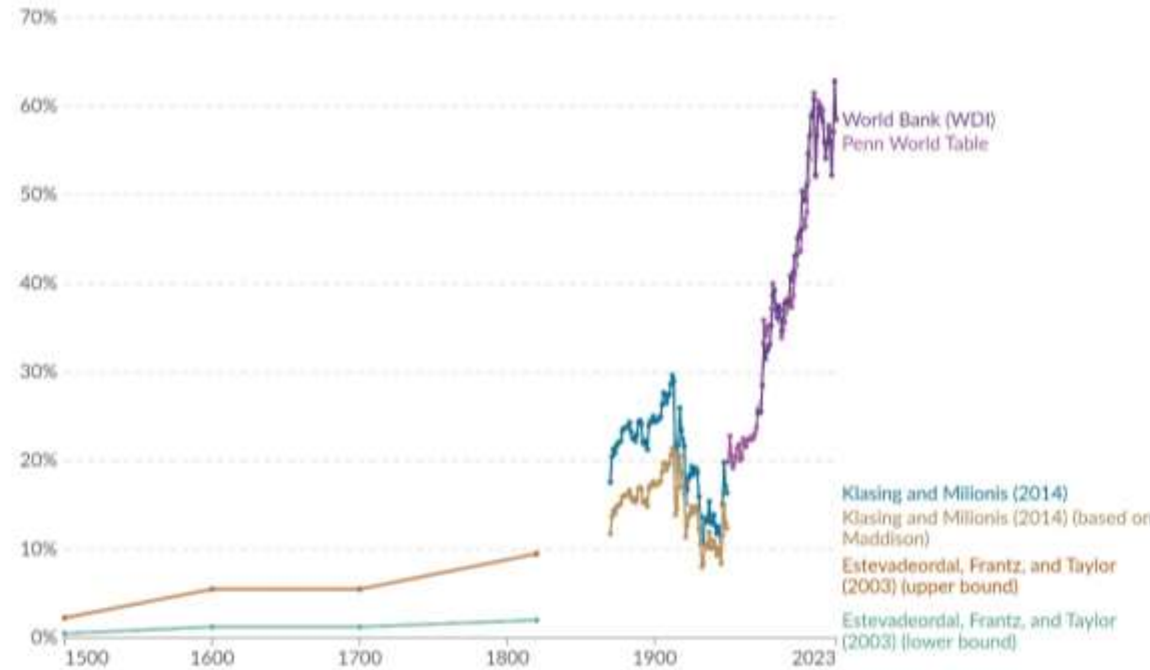
The benefits of specialization receive the most emphasis in classical trade theories. According to the Absolute Advantage by Adam Smith, nations must produce goods they can produce more efficiently than other nations, and trade surplus for another form of necessities (O'Sullivan, 2021). David Ricardo expanded this with his version of comparative advantage which is that even less efficient nations will gain by specializing in things with lower opportunity costs (Encyclopedia, 2018). To illustrate, Portugal trading wine for English cloth in the 19th century is such an example. In the 20th century, the Heckscher-Ohlin (H-O) model is a model of trade based on the endowments of mathematical factors (e.g., labor, capital). Goods that are highly dependent on the nation's abundant resources are exported and goods that need inputs of the nations' scarce resources are imported by nations (Daudin et al., 2010). However, this fails to explain trade between similar economies and new frameworks are proposed (Prakasha, et al., 2024). To validate this claim, Paul Krugman advanced the New Trade Theory that incorporates economies of scale and monopolistic competition (Rana, et al., 2021; Khan, et al., 2021; Sarmad, 2016). It is the reason why countries that have the same resources trade differentiated products (Germany and Japan exchange cars). Interindustry trade too is sustained by consumer preference for variety while the firms by leveraging scale reduce costs (Batabyal, 2021). Modern global supply chains are built on this theory whereby multinational corporations reallocate production to the border that best suits efficiency.

Debates currently underway also focus on global value chains (GVCs) and digital trade. Produce how GVCs spread the stages of production globally and also cover who does which functions (e.g., China does assembly, Germany works on engineering). Digital platforms and e-commerce recreate old barriers of trade, at least in some cases, but lack of regulatory commonality under 'gated globalization' (Stanley, 2023).

3. Historical Evolution of Global Trade

Whether globalization can be traced to its history of origins remains a subject of debate. Although it is widely claimed that the modern era is characterized by the beginnings of globalization, others argue that globalization is a phenomenon that has a long history (Peters, 2023). Any time during or after the year 1492 is sometimes the focus of some authors (Bozonelos et al., n.d.). Jerry Bentley argues that even before 1500, "trade networks reached almost all regions of Eurasia and sub-Saharan Africa (O'Rourke & Williamson, 2000). According to Paul Hopper, it can be assumed that the history of globalization is a circulation of ideas, people (media culture), goods and artefacts around the world are measured in thousands of years (Hopper, 2007). but most scholars and theorists concentrate on the much more recent past (Bozonelos et al., n.d.) such as it is believed that the first wave of globalization began with the gold standard in the 1800s (National Bureau of Economic Research, n.d.). Despite not exactly when it is debated what the beginning of globalization was, however, the progression of globalization is often measured by trade shares versus GDP or total economic output. Since 1870, the era of globalization has unfolded according to five different cycles, peaking towards the second half of the 20th century preceding the global financial crisis of 2008–10 and then demonstrated by the subsequent economic conflict between the United States and China and the coronavirus pandemic (Hashemi-Pour & Lutkevich, 2023). The figure 3 is showing "trade openness index". The sum of world exports and imports is divided by world GDP is what is called this index. There is one series for each source.

Figure 3: Globalization over 5 centuries



Source: Klasing and Milionis (2014) and other sources, OurWorldinData.org/trade-and-globalization.

In more detail, global trade has a rich history that can be traced back to ancient times with humans, tribes, and countries engaging in trade for mutual benefit (Nutshell, n.d.). The period from the first century B.C. through the third century A.D. and from 3000 BCE to 500 CE, marked the beginning of global trade. International trade started in ancient times and saw a time of unprecedented economic contact between the Mediterranean world (under the dominion of the Roman Empire) and the political entities bordering along the Western Indian Ocean (Autiero, 2022). Moreover, in the 1st century BC, for the first time in history, luxury products from China started to appear on the other edge of the Eurasian continent – in Rome (Vanham, 2019). Furthermore, as per American Trading International (2022), the Silk Road started after the Han Dynasty (206 BC–220 AD) expanded its rule over Central Asia. The country it began in was the city of Xi'an, in China, the city where globalization was first launched (Vanham, 2019). This permitted the Chinese people to travel to central Asia to start businesses. The first trade route between Eastern and Western had been the Silk Road. This was an important trade route between Asia and Europe by way of the Middle East (American Trading International, 2022). Trade also spread as the new religion radiated in all directions throughout Arabia from the Arabian heartland in the seventh century. Once Muslim traders dominated the Mediterranean and Indian Ocean trade, they could be seen from the East and West ends, such as in Indonesia and Moorish Spain, accordingly (Global Challenges, 2018). Specifically, spices found their way from Europe to Asia and Northeast Africa from the 7th to the 15th century. At its start, the goods traded were spices, such as cloves, nutmeg and mace, which came from the Maluku Islands of Indonesia (American Deposit Management, 2022), spices were traded to Europe through the Middle East and Asia on land and sea routes, and spices were precious for eating in food dishes as well for medicines (Cartwright, 2021). This was greatly increased with the advent of the spice routes and when sea routes were established between the East and the West (American Deposit Management, 2022). Within a brief period between 1300, the Ottomans created their Empire which stretched Europe, North Africa and the Middle East, and also overland were linked politically with the Safavid dynasty and dynasties in Central Asia and India (Shah, et al., 2025; Haq, et al., 2024; Noor, et al., 2024). Then it produced the great imperial arch for trade integration that brought a big expansion of trade with Europe, but at the cost of high trade charges for Europeans in the Asian countries (Ahmad, et al., 2021; Ali, et al., 2020; Ahmad, 2018). Primitive (proto) globalization started with the integration of the global world in the period of the 'long sixteenth century', i.e. not very long ago – about 500 years ago. Thus, it was sometimes thought of as the 'Protoglobalization' period. The great geographical discoveries had made the most important regions of the world connected in a global net that had to transport flows of goods, capital, migration, cultural symbols and artefacts, ideas, knowledge and technologies, and pathogens and epidemics etc. (Andreev et al., 2015). The 17th century saw the new age of globalization in which part of the world sought trade relations with the other part. Globalization linked one part of the world to another, and capitalism was born. Products, people and ideas that had launched the movement and transculturation of capitalism. Globalization is just an effect known as 'transculturation', that joins people from various backgrounds to indicate the world (Ali, et al., 2021; Muhammad, et al., 2020; Farooq, et al., 2019).

Furthermore, the trend towards globalization of the international economy at the end of the 18th century was connected to the spread of liberalism/nationalism, which corresponds to the beginning of the Industrial Revolution (Ali, et al., 2023; Yasmin, et al., 2020). Still, the invention of new technology dropped the price of many commodities in the real price. Take for instance, the statistics by Allen which indicate that from 1781, the price of cotton was reduced to half (by over 50% in 20 years) from 8 grams of silver per metre to 3 grams of silver per metre in 1801. By 1855, Japan, China and Korea also had all opened their formerly protectionist economic policies (Ellis, 2018).

The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries also experienced a period of historically exceptional spatial economic integration throughout and between continents in the "First Great Wave of Globalization" (Meissner, 2015). Between 1850 and 1913 transportation costs fell, information flow intensified, tariffs declined, and free trade agreements with unconditional most favoured nation clauses and treaty ports proliferated, as did empires. The Governments also increased the formal technical cooperation. In 1865, the International Telegraph Union was formed as was the Universal Postal Union in 1874. As well, humanitarian cooperation was expanded: the Red Cross was established in 1863 and the first Geneva Convention was concluded in 1864. These global institutions were joined by most of the sovereign states, both European and non-European. Rising globalization took another form in that there was a growing number of international exchanges and contests. Each nation took turns as the World Fair official showcases the technical prowess of that nation. The first Venice Biennale was in 1895. The modern Olympics began in 1896. Daudin, Morys & O'Rourke (2010) noted that the first five Nobel Prizes were awarded in 1901.

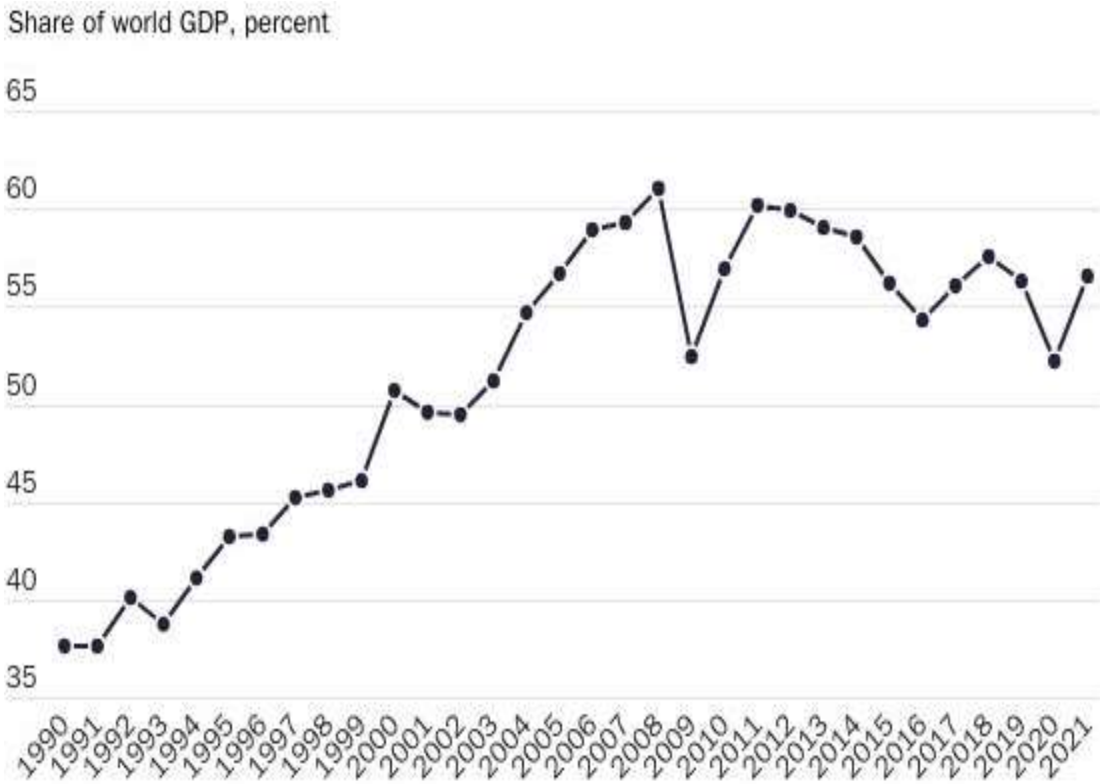
European investments, however, were in the field before World War I. From 1870 to 1914, is referred to as the golden age of globalization (Hashemi-Pour, Lutkevich, 2023). All the countries have closed their borders again, since the First World War (1914). Global trade fell again. In the past one hundred fifty years there has been a slow change in each country and now world trade is limited due to the First World War. This resulted in a recession, which was named Great Depression. The fall of the global economy was taken as an example in the 20th century during the Great Depression. Between 1929 and 1932 global GDP fell about 15%. Another effect of the Great Depression was that the economy of many countries lasted until the beginning of World War II. After then, World War, world trade almost stopped (Biswas, 2023). Although it was Post WWII globalization initiated by the United States and global trade would increase (Anonymous Student, 2023). In addition, during World War II (WordPress, 2013), new global economic reforms were also agreed upon a year before the end of the war by the United States along with its wartime allies.

Bretton Woods, N.H.: The leaders of the world met to plan how to rebuild the world's destroyed economy. One of the major common goals was to resurrect trade and cross-border investment without causing economic catastrophes like the weeks leading up to the war (Batabyal, 2021).

A new form of a global financial stability was created by the international financial agreements and institutions such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. States had the power to establish their economic policies and to fix their levels of taxation, which were exceptionally high in today's terms. States could tightly control what money could be passed across borders and thus limit the potentially negative impact of foreign speculative money in the market (WordPress, 2013). Right after that people realized that in order to manage world trade it was necessary to have such an institution to govern trade. Consequently, GATT emerged from this. Therefore, the new stage of globalization (Batabyal, 2021) started in the late 1940s. Beginning from 1950, USA's brisk trade growth and EU's Free Trade developed the world economic environment. But unlike the USA the USSR had increased its international commerce through centrally planned rather than free trade. At the global economy's rate once more. The export sector is once more at the 1914 level of 14% of the world GDP. The fall of the Soviet Union has been followed by free trade all over the world. In general, this new global economic order between the late 1940s and early 1970s was deemed the Golden Age of Capitalism, and was designed to avoid a recurrence of the catastrophic economic conditions that revived the Great Depression of the 1930s. According to (WordPress, 2013), this international arrangement required the close cooperation between nation states, rather than international economic competitions between nations of the 1930s. During 1980–2008 removal of barriers to trade in China and other large emerging market economies as well as unprecedented international economic cooperation including the integration of former Soviet bloc (Stanley, 2023). Furthermore, in the 1990s, the United States, Russia, the People's Republic of China, and the Opec member states became major movers of the world's combined economic trends (LOUIS, 2022). In 1995, the World Trade Organization was born as a new multilateral overseer of trade agreements, negotiations, and dispute settlement. As a result, the global financial system became more complex and more interconnected due to inflows of cross-border capital flows (Stanley, 2023).

International trade scales have shrunk significantly after the 2008 financial crisis and already for four consecutive years, the growth rate of trade was less than 3%. This has been a rare low growth rate for the past 5 decades. As far as the merchandise movement is concerned, after a sharp drop in 2008, the expectation was that this would continue to rise at rates more or less the same for the period preceding the crisis. But this is not the case. From 2009 to 2018, trade volume averaged 3.5 per cent annual growth, much less than the 7.6 per cent average pre-2008 financial crisis. (Li et al., 2021). COVID19, the Ukraine crises, the now simmering U.S China tensions or trade war (Lincicome, 2023), a number of protectionist waves including, for instance, Brexit (Li et al., 2021), to trade off the environment. Many politicians and pundits have boldly proclaimed a new era of de-globalization because of the rising populism in America. (Lincicome, 2023). Despite the fact that the world economy is at a high risk of being plunged into depression and the evidences point to a period during which a decade ago, we may be living in a period of de-globalization (Li et al., 2021). Proclaim boldly that a new era of de-globalization has arrived. Now, factories are 're-shoring,' economies are 'decoupling,' and nobody is doing anymore 'neoliberal' free trade. Others have gone so far as to openly and ominously ask if we are in the "end of globalization" or even the "death of globalization" (which is the slowing share of both goods trade and total trade as a share of global gross domestic product (GDP) since the Great Recession (Figure 2 and Figure 4) (Lincicome, 2013).

Figure 4: Total trade has slowed down as a share of world GDP since the Great Recession



Source: Trade (Percentage of GDP). World Development Indicators, World Bank.

4. Gated Globalization Explained

Gated globalization refers to fragmented and selective modes of global economic integration where countries prioritise strategic autonomy over open unrestricted free trade. This paradigm is not aligned with the post-World War II era of hyperglobalization—multi-literalism, open borders, and global supply chain integration—characterized by highly regulated, controlled engagement through regulatory, technological and geopolitical 'gates.' Policies like tariffs, export controls, for instance, and digital sovereignty laws, or regional trade blocs that seek to restrict cross-border flows to match national concerns are encapsulated in the term (Stanley, 2023). Regulatory fragmentation is one of the defining characteristics of gated globalization. Nations are increasingly adopting divergent standards for data governance, environmental compliance, and product safety among others, making trading seamless nearly impossible. Thus, the European Union's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) requires strict localization of data, thereby restricting cross-border data transfers and stretching the operations of arbitrage firms globally (Batabyal, 2021). As with carbon border taxes, for example, the EU's Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM), carbon taxes penalise imports from countries with low environmental standards, which may well end up fragmenting markets on sustainability grounds (Stanley, 2023).

Strategic decoupling is also being constantly referred to as a hallmark, such as major economies reducing their reliance on adversarial supply chains. This trend is reflected in the U.S. CHIPS and Science Act (2022), which limits access to Chinese companies of semiconductors and subsidizes domestic production. These schemes attempt to contain risks posed by geopolitical antagonists but tend to create market bifurcation: as U.S.-aligned and China-led technology ecosystems have separated (Li et al., 2021). At the same, multilateralism has been supplanted by regionalism, as many states prefer blocs like the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) of Asia and the U.S.-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA) of North America. Geopolitical alliance above global cooperation puts these alliances deep in taker mode, further demoralizing the influence of the World Trade Organization (Schifferes, 2025).

4. Drivers of Gated Globalization

Political Drivers

A principal catalyst for gated globalization is geopolitics. Protectionism results from strategic competition when there is a U.S.-China trade war (2018–present). At the same time, the U.S. imposed tariffs on $360 billion of Chinese goods and blacklisted firms such as Huawei and sought to use those actions as a counter to what it perceived as China's technological ascendancy, prompting countermeasures that fractured global supply chains (Li et al., 2021). This trend intensifies further in the context of national security concerns. However, today governments see economic interdependence as a vulnerability, especially in critical sectors such as energy and defence. As an example, advanced semiconductors are subject to export controls to stop adversaries from obtaining dual-use technologies; their reshaping of the global trade system is on security, not efficiency (Schifferes, 2025).

Populism and nationalism also fuel fragmentation. Public disillusionment with globalization's uneven benefits shows in movements such as Brexit and America's "Buy American" policies. Home grown ideologies favour the maintenance of domestic jobs, or at least international sovereignty (Kayani, et al., 2023; Khan, et al., 2021). This shift is exemplified by the Trump administration's claimed use of tariffs on steel and aluminium to 'protect U.S. industries' (Nikolic, 2019).

Economic Drivers

Protectionist policies have been reinforced by economic inequality, supply chain vulnerabilities, etc. Companies trying to protect their businesses from globalization have lobbied for tariffs and incentives to encourage manufacturing workers in the U.S. Rust Belt to 'restore' (Lincicome, 2017). During the COVID-19 pandemic, hyperglobalized supply chains became exposed as a lack of medical equipment and semiconductors resulted in nations focusing on self-sufficiency. This pivot toward resilience over cost efficiency is demonstrated by the EU's Chips Act which allocates €43 billion for bolstering semiconductor production (Stanley, 2023).

The trade imbalances and complaints of unfair practices contribute to further fragmentation. However, justified retaliatory tariffs and investment restrictions have been argued due to chronic U.S. trade deficits with China, suspicions of currency manipulation, and state subsidies. Economic decoupling is even being worsened by such measures, for example, an already declining cross-border investment between the two nations after 2018 (Li et al., 2021).

Social Drivers

Globalization's social costs have brought in public backlash, reshaping policy agendas. The 'Yellow Vests' protests in France, for example, represent movements of concern over elite and inequality and call for attention to the domestic welfare at the expense of global integration (Batabyal, 2021). At the same time, trade conditions have become stricter due to advocacy for climate action and labour rights. The CBAM of the EU measures binding carbon-intensive imports but this could exclude developing nations that lack green infrastructure (Stanley, 2023).

Gated globalization is also concerned with digital sovereignty concerns. Data privacy and the fight against misinformation are increasingly being regulated by nations against the tech giants. China's Great Firewall and India's data localization laws compel foreign firms like Google and Meta to operate in siloed digital markets (Schifferes, 2025).

Impact on Trade Relationships

Global trade dynamics have been massively affected by the process of gated globalization. After 2008, global merchandise trade has slowed markedly at an average annual rate of 3.5%, from 7.6% before 2008 (Li et al, 2021). Tariffs and non-tariff barriers (NTBs) increase the cost of doing business and consuming, for example, U.S.-China tariffs cost consumers $51 billion a year (Tax Foundation, 2023). However, such diversification of supply chains to improve resilience has also increased logistical complexities and lengthened lead times, as has been illustrated by the disruptions in the 2021 Suez Canal blockage (Stanley, 2023). International partnerships have redefined themselves into regional alliances. RCEP is an intra-Asian trade creating 30 per cent of the world economy against the Western economies. Similarly, USMCA's rules of origin for automobiles reward North American production and decrease reliance on Chinese parts (Batabyal, 2021). Bilateral negotiations or unilateral measures have replaced multilateral institutions like the WTO. The erosion of trust in the case of the U.S.-EU dispute over aircraft subsidies (Boeing vs. Airbus), which was resolved not via WTO arbitration, but through the use of retaliatory tariffs, is exemplified by this (Schifferes, 2025). By fragmenting, that undermines global governance. It complicates the search for global solutions to global challenges such as climate change and pandemic response (Li et al. 21). Some sectors have benefited from paradoxically the innovation spurred by gated globalization. Trade barriers are mitigated through automation and nearshoring; firms benefit from subsidies like the U.S. Inflation Reduction Act for green industries. Unfortunately, this inequality further exacerbates between multinational corporations and local businesses because small and medium enterprises (SMEs) face difficulty in navigating through complex regulations.

CASE STUDIES

Case Study 1: United States

Recent Protectionist Policies and Global Trade Dynamics

Since the 2010s, protectionist policies have become increasingly the default for the United States, reversing decades of free trade advocacy.

Chinese exports totalling around 360 billion worth of goods including those related to steel, aluminium and technology to U.S. industries hit under Section 301 of the Trade Act 1974. These measures aimed to address alleged intellectual property theft and unfair subsidies but triggered retaliatory tariffs from China, disrupting global supply chains (Lincicome,2017; Schifferes,2025). The Biden administration retained many of these tariffs, reflecting bipartisan concerns over China's strategic competition, while introducing new policies like the CHIPS and Science Act (2022). This act allocates 52 billion to bolster domestic semiconductor production and restricts exports of advanced chips to China, accelerating technological decoupling (Li et al., 2021).

The 'Buy American' executive order (2021) focused on domestic manufacturing for federal contracts in sectors including infrastructure and renewable energy. According to these policies, trade dynamics have shifted: US imports from China fell by 13% from 2018 to 2022, and while imports from Mexico and Vietnam increased by 62% and 24 respectively, foreign firms have diversified suppliers (U.S. Census Bureau, 2023). Even though tariffs were raising consumer prices by 51 billion annually (TaxFoundation,2023), they disproportionately affected low-income households. Collateral damage was done to the agricultural sector with 7528 billion (USDA, 2020) soybean exports to China.

U.S. protectionism has contributed to eroding trust across the globe in multilateral institutions. As a result, since 2017 when the WTO Appellate Body appointments have been blocked, dispute resolution has been paralyzed – incentivizing the EU and Japan to band together to form alternative alliances (Schifferes, 2025). At the same time, the CHIPS Act has inspired similar MAS in the EU, and South Korea, which has split the semiconductor industry into a bloc that is aligned with the US and a bloc that is aligned with China (Stanley, 2023).

Case Study 2: European Union

Regulatory Frameworks and Gated Globalization

From this, the European Union has emerged as a regulatory superpower, with strict standards dictating the direction of trade around the world. The 2018 passage of the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) imposes a limit on the kinds of data transfers across borders that do not apply equivalent privacy protection, effectively erecting digital trade barriers. For example, non-EU firms such as Meta and Google have been fined more than €4 billion for breaching these laws and have been compelled to localise the storage of data (Batabyal, 2021). Like CBAM, the Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM), due to be fully implemented in 2026, taxes imports according to the carbon footprint of sectors such as steel and cement. As an effort to combat climate change, CBAM is a regulation that will disadvantage countries like India and South Africa, countries where green infrastructure simply does not exist (Stanley, 2023).

Trade partners including Brazil and Argentina are affected because the EU's "farm to fork" strategy requires strict environmental and animal welfare standards on imports. Non-tariff barriers (NTB) have shaved the EU meat imports from Mercosur countries down by 18 per cent since 2020 (Eurostat, 2023). Furthermore, technology exports to China and Russia face difficulties under the EU's Dual Use Regulation which regulates exports of technologies with military applications.

The EU inscribes these policies in a context of prioritization of sustainability and security ahead of neo globalization. But that strategy risks alienating developing nations and splintering trade into blocs. For example, from the perspective of the post Russia–Ukraine war, the reliance of the EU on regional energy partnership, for example, of LNG with the U.S. and Norway, speaks to a shift toward 'friend shoring' (Li et al. 2021).

Case Study 3: China

Trade Policies and Global Fragmentation

Exacerbating global fragmentation, China's trade policies have of late taken a turn towards self-reliance and the strategic dominance of one country. The "Made in China 2025" initiative offers subsidies for robotics and AI, and seeks to replace foreign technology. As a result, steel and other sectors have become over capacitated, flooding global markets and causing anti-dumping tariffs from the EU and India (Schifferes, 2025). China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) meanwhile is building up its influence in Asia, Africa, and Latin America through infrastructure loans that are frequently accompanied by the use of Chinese contractors and materials. However, BRI has delivered $117 billion in increased trade with China's partner countries since 2013 but left less developed countries like Sri Lanka and Pakistan indebted to the tune of $30 billion there (World Bank, 2023). The export controls on the critical minerals, such as the rare earth element, weaponize trade. In 2021, China banned the export of gallium and germanium, but essential for semiconductors amid tightening U.S. tech restraints creating havoc in global supply chains (Li et al., 2021). Through its "dual circulation" strategy, China aims to promote internal demand and controlled openness reducing imports of consumer goods by 9% last year (National Bureau of Statistics of China, 2023). These policies have accelerated decoupling. Since 2018, the U.S. and EU have decreased their direct investment in China by 52 per cent to Southeast Asia and India (UNCTAD, 2023). However, China has strengthened ties with Russia and Iran, and oil and technology were traded in yuan to bypass sanctions (Schifferes, 2025).

Case Study 4: Emerging Economies

Navigating Gated Globalization

The supply chain shift presents emerging economies with dual pressures; leverage opportunities from supply chain shifts while mitigating protectionist risks. For instance, in Vietnam, $36 billion in FDI flowed in 2022, a rise of 32% from 2020, as Samsung and Apple moved production (World Bank, 2023). But compliance for Vietnamese SMEs, which do not have the resources to adopt green technologies, is impeded by the U.S. and EU regulations of labour and sustainability (Batabyal, 2021).

India’s Production linked incentive (PLI) scheme gives $26bn in subsidies to encourage domestic manufacturing in electronics and pharmaceutical. This has received investments from Foxconn and Micron, but due to the Indian data localization laws that make long term commitments difficult (Stanley, 2023), India’s unpredictable tariff hikes such as the sudden levies on solar panels in 2022 (Stanley, 2023), prevent long term commitments. African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) is a plan to counter fragmentation, bringing together 1.3 billion people under a single market in Africa. Yet, such vulnerabilities in economies such as Nigeria are specifically exacerbated by infrastructure gaps and their dependence on raw material exporting, resulting in a greater likelihood of EU CBAM and China’s slowed growth (Li et al., 2021).

Implications for Global Trade

Economic Impacts

In the process of globalization, the global supply chain has been destabilized by gated globalization and has since gained traction, which was once optimized for cost efficiency. Export controls, such as in the case of the U.S.-China trade war, forced firms to diversify suppliers and increase costs of production by 10–15% in sectors like electronics and automotive (Li et al., 2021). For instance, Apple moved 18 per cent of its iPhone production to India and Vietnam, in 2023, but encountered strains of infrastructure gaps and skill shortages (Stanley, 2023). As an example, the EU’s Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM) impedes developing market access. As India and the likes of Bangladesh specialise in carbon-intensive exports such as steel and textiles, they face ‘additional costs of $6–8 billion annually to comply with EU standards [pricing] them out’ of key markets (Batabyal, 2021). There has been a stagnation of trade growth in the post-2008 period with merchandise trade rising by 3.5% annually, compared to 7.6% before 2008 (Li et al., 2021). Now tariffs and other non-tariff barriers (NTBs) combine to account for 15 per cent of the costs of trade, double the impact of tariffs (WTO, 2023). Small and medium enterprises (SMEs) are hit hard, with 40 per cent of resources not available to tackle complex rules which have shrunk export participation by 25 per cent since 2015 (World Bank, 2023).

Rising Costs and Inflation

Protectionist policies have fueled inflation. Twice a year, U.S.-China tariffs added $51 billion annually to consumer prices costing an extra $12 per year on a washing machine and $30 on a solar panel (Tax Foundation, 2023). Although reshoring industries such as semiconductors has improved supply chain resilience, this has increased production costs by 20 to 40 per cent over offshore manufacturing (Lincicome, 2023).

Political Implications

Nationalism and Erosion of Multilateralism

nationalists have undermined global trade governance. The U.S. stonewalled the WTO dispute settlement system with the Appellate Body appointments for 60 per cent less trade disputes (Schifferes, 2025). Multilateralism (EU and WTO) has given way to bilateralism in the form of "autonomous trade instruments" devised by the EU to respond to unfair practices without WTO supervision, as Stanley (2023) points out. Sovereignty takes priority over cooperation in populist agendas. In our study, Brexit, driven by anti-globalization sentiment, resulted in a 14% reduction in UK-EU trade from 2020 to 2023 and caused costs for the bureaucratic demands that SMEs experienced in the UK to rise by £15 billion (Eurostat, 2023). India's "Atmanirbhar Bharat" (Self-Reliant India) campaign had imposed import bans on 1,000 products to culturally promote 'Atmanirbhar Bharat' (Self Reliant India) while stifling technology transfer by raising input costs for manufacturers (Batabyal, 2021).

Geopolitical Fragmentation

Trade has splintered into blocs as strategic rivalries. While China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) ties with 147 nations to extend its economy into parallel economic ecosystems (Li et al., 2021), the U.S.-led Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF) excludes China. In a recent example, the semiconductor industry is seen clearly which U.S. sanctions of Chinese companies such as SMIC prompted China to invest $150 billion for domestic chip production, but yields for advanced nodes languish remain below 30 per cent compared to Taiwan's 80 per cent (Schifferes, 2025).

Social Considerations

Employment and Labor Markets

Protectionism has uneven employment effects. Tariffs purported to save 12,000 steel industry jobs in the U.S., but cost 75,000 jobs in other manufacturing industries that rely on steel inputs (Lincicome, 2017). On the other hand, developing nations will lose jobs since export markets dwindle. Out of 84 per cent of those exported, the garment sector in Bangladesh shed 500,000 jobs in 2022 due to the decline in EU orders under CBAM (World Bank, 2023).

Automation and nearshoring add to the disruption of the labour market. As U.S firms shifted their production to Mexico, wages for Mexican auto workers rose by 8% but total employment of auto workers went down by 10% (Stanley, 2023).

Inequality Within and Between Nations

Gated globalization exacerbates inequality. Fifty per cent of the goods purchased by low-income households are tariff-affected goods like clothing and electronics (Tax Foundation, 2023). At the same time, there are emerging economies with a “green divide”: If an African country is responsible for 3% of global emissions, then it is 25% of CBAM-related costs due to fossil fuel dependence (Batabyal, 2021). Enhanced trade barriers on women dominated sectors (such as textiles and agriculture) contribute to widening gender disparities. Most garment workers, 70% of the workforce, are women in Vietnam, but only 5 per cent of firms are able to afford EU sustainability certifications, leading to the risk of mass layoffs (ILO, 2023).

Future Prospects and Recommendations

Potential Scenarios for Global Trade

A scenario emerging at present is marked by rising protectionism, political friction, and technology developments; it presents an environment with transformative potential for the global trade landscape. A continuation of gated globalization would be a scenario in which nations prioritize strategic autonomy over free trade. That could go on to break international markets further into special status, thus clogging international markets into mini economies, possibly difficult to collaborate on the global issues of alternate course of action like climate change and public health (Li et al., 2021). A second situation is the momentum towards regional trade deals eclipsing multilateral organizations including the World Trade Organization (WTO). Countries may push for increased regulatory divergence and therefore distress global supply chains, also adding to costs for businesses (Stanley, 2023). Digital barriers to trade will rise, with countries passing stricter data localization laws and cybersecurity measures, and more and more segmenting markets across the globe. (Batabyal, 2021). However, in a more optimistic turn of events, nations realize that cooperation is in all of their mutual benefits in life. It could manifest through the urge to revitalize and reform multilateral institutions, ensuring that inclusive policies are adopted regarding the working of the economy. To achieve such a shift would require both a commitment to shared governance and paying down global inequalities or it may result in a more balanced and sustainable global trade system (Lincicome, 2023).

Recommendations for Policymakers

Different strategies could be undertaken to mitigate fragmentation's negative effects and enhance inclusive trade policies.

Strengthen Multilateral Institutions:

Policymakers should concentrate on the improvement of multilateral organizations such as the WTO, aiming at improving the international institutions' abilities in the trade market of the day. Among this are streamlining the processes of dispute resolution and guaranteeing that all its member countries participate in the negotiations, especially those in developing nations (Schifferes, 2025).

Inclusive Trade Agreements:

Trade agreements must include environmental sustainability and labour rights provisions as they will be beneficial to all countries. For instance, integrating climate goals within trade deals helps to adopt the environmental aspect of economic growth (Stanley, 2023). Trade barriers tend to disproportionately affect small and medium enterprises (SMEs). To reduce the risk of SMEs entering bankruptcies in the short term, policymakers need to fall back on developing targeted support programs that provide SMEs with resources and training to facilitate their work in complex regulations and to be able to reach international markets (Li et al., 2021). Technological Collaboration Fostering: This further helps in bridging the gap of talent gap between the developed and developing countries by encouraging international cooperation in technology and innovation. They can do joint research initiatives and technology transfer agreements for knowledge sharing and global supply chain (Batabyal, 2021). Trade and addressing Inequality: Inequalities within and between nations must be addressed by trade policies. Such mechanisms, for example, fair wage policies and social safety nets can help mitigate the adverse effects of globalization on vulnerable populations (Lincicome, 2023). By implementing such strategies, policymakers will be able to establish a richer, more resilient and more equitable global trade setting where the advantages of globalization are spread widely and sustainably.

Conclusion

Several findings emerge in examining the fragmentation of global trade from protectionism to ' 'gated globalization, ' ' which I define as a form of market segmentation that allows the production and consumption of goods to take place without having to include necessary related component inputs. The first one is that protectionist policies have a long history in international trade; they have appeared in times of economic uncertainty or geopolitical tension. Examples of the evolution of protectionism include tariff and non-tariff barriers, which tend to occur in cycles, as appears to have happened both during the Great Depression and in the context of the recent U.S.–China tariffs. The implications of these trends are quite profound, and they are in the context of economies increasingly connected. Second, gated globalization entails the abandoned final pathway of globally integrated specialisations and the substitution of it by selective economic integration whereby countries prioritise narrowly defined national interests over the common global effort. Regulatory fragmentation constitutes this paradigm in which nations adopt divergent standards to impede cross-border trade, and investment (Stanley, 2023). This means that businesses will have higher operational costs and more uncertainties while consumers can be subjected to higher prices or less availability of products. Policymakers, businesses, and scholars need to understand the concept of trade fragmentation. By shining a light on a fast-evolving global terrain, of cooperation and competition in one, it demonstrates one should adapt to the changing times. In the current state of globalization, it is well recognized that the economies of states are tightly interdependent and consequently interdependent actions on the growth of economies and tackling global challenges, such as climate change and public health crises (Batabyal, 2021). The future of global trade remains uncertain. Some scenarios see more fragmentation and the proliferation of regional trade blocs while others see a return to multilateral cooperation and more inclusive trade policies. This duality forces policymakers to strike a balance between national interests and the collective benefits deriving from global trade. Lincicome (2023) observes that for a resilient and equitable trade environment, fair trade practices, the support of small and medium enterprises, and addressing inequalities will be key to shaping it. Finally, while the fragmentation of global trade presents significant challenges, it also offers opportunities for innovation and cooperation. It can open the way for each nation to encourage dialogue and cooperation with others' nations in order to build a more integrated, and at the same time, equal global economy. All stakeholders will need to be committed to making sure that the benefits of trade are broadly shared leading the way to a sustainable and prosperous future in world trade.

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