

China-US Trade War and the Challenges for Developing Countries

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Abstract

The US-China trade war signifies a fundamental shift in global economic governance, which has moved beyond a mere tariff dispute to redefine the nature of the strategic environment, particularly for developing countries. This research seeks to explore the vulnerabilities that the US-China trade war imposes on developing countries through three mechanisms: trade diversion that provides asymmetric opportunities based on adaptive capacities, intensification of alignment pressures that require developing countries to deal with competing regulations, and the securitization of their economic dependencies, which transforms supply chain participation into a geopolitical liability. Utilizing a process tracing methodology, this research seeks to analyze the sequences through which tariff escalations and technology restrictions spread across the world, thereby concentrating their dependencies and imposing a new dimension of vulnerability on developing countries. It argues that while developing countries benefit from the production relocation, their overall dependence on the rest of the world has increased, with integration happening within power-contested rather than market-driven frameworks. The US-China trade war, as this research seeks to demonstrate, signifies a structural shift in the nature of the relationship between economic integration and security, with far-reaching implications for developmental autonomy.

1. Introduction

The rivalry between United States and China marks a shift in global political economy. What began in 2018 as a trade war has evolved into a contest over governance and resources. Trade policy is no longer confined to market regulation. It has become instrument of competition. This transformation reflects reconfiguration of interdependence under conditions of power rivalry: economic integration generates exposure rather than mutual restraint (Bown, 2025; Farrell & Newman, 2019).

The U.S.–China trade war is therefore not just a bilateral dispute. It constitutes a shock transmitted through networks and linkages. Because United States and China occupy positions in bottlenecks of trade and production hierarchies, any disruptions would propagate across regions, and even sectors. Current scholarship has examined effects of tariffs (Amiti et al., 2019), global trade reallocation (Fajgelbaum et al., 2024), and institutional tensions within liberal order (Ikenberry, 2008). Yet less attention has been given to how confrontation reshapes position of countries.

Developing Countries are not passive observers of this rivalry. Many are integrated into systems that link Chinese capacity with Western markets. Others depend on exports, technology, or financing tied to one or both major powers. Conflict between great powers, under these conditions, does not only generate

volatility. It reorganizes dependence, alters pathways, and reframes economic-security relations. Interdependence, once understood as source of growth, becomes entangled with vulnerability.

This study examines how the trade war reshapes security vulnerabilities for developing countries. It advances three claims. First, trade conflict generates asymmetric opportunities through trade diversion. It benefits countries with existing production capacity, but meanwhile, increases exposure for those lacking adaptive capabilities. Second, intensifying rivalry produces pressures of alignment. This happens as states embedded in overlapping economic networks confront competing regulatory. Third, the securitization of trade policy transforms economic dependencies into strategic liabilities. It creates loops in which participation in global supply chains heightens geopolitical risk rather than mitigating it. The trade war thus represents not a temporary disruption but a structural transformation in the relationship between economic integration and national security within the global system.

2. Theoretical Framework: Interdependence Under Strategic Rivalry

Classical perspectives on interdependence see how trade and financial linkages raise costs of conflict, and thus, encourage restraint among states integrated into economic systems. Institutionalist accounts stress the role of rules and institutions in mediating competition and preserving cooperation under globalization. However, these expectations rest on the assumption that interdependence operates as a mechanism of benefit rather than leverage. Some scholars challenge this assumption by demonstrating how economic relations can generate dependence and enable coercion. In centralized international systems, states occupying core nodes in finance, technology, or supply chains may transform interdependence into an instrument of power. Henry Farrell and Abraham L. Newman describe this condition as “weaponized interdependence,” in which positions within networks allow states to monitor, restrict, or disrupt flows (Farrell & Newman, 2019). Under such conditions, integration does not eliminate vulnerability. It redistributes it.

Power rivalry intensifies these dynamics. When competition expands into policy, regulation, and governance, relations become securitized. States evaluate ties in terms of resilience, control, and exposure rather than efficiency. The boundary between policy and security erodes. Interdependence becomes contested, and participation in markets may generate risks alongside gains. Developing countries occupy a position within this system. Many are embedded in spheres of influence: integrated into networks linked to one power while dependent on markets, finance, or technology associated with another. This dependence limits autonomy. As rivalry deepens, relationships become channels of pressure, and pathways become conditioned by competition. Interdependence functions not as a framework of exchange but as a structure of exposure shaped by the distribution of power within networks.

3. Method

This study employs process tracing to identify mechanisms through which trade conflict generates vulnerabilities for developing countries. Process tracing uncovers how outcomes emerge through sequences of events and decisions. It focuses on identifying mechanisms that connect shocks to consequences, as developed in work by Alexander L. George and Andrew Bennett (2005), and refined in applications by Derek Beach and Rasmus Pedersen (2019). The approach reconstructs the sequence through which the U.S.–China conflict alters the setting facing developing countries. Analysis proceeds by identifying the shock of tariffs and restrictions between powers, followed by transmission mechanisms like the reconfiguration of chains and fragmentation. These lead to effects such as concentration of dependence and exposure to regimes. The objective is to demonstrate how mechanisms link actions in economies to changes in the environment of developing countries.

Evidence is drawn from documents including records from the World Trade Organization, authorities, and reports, but also mostly more scholarly works. Research on restructuring, reallocation, and governance is used to identify patterns consistent with mechanisms. The argument generates implications that guide interpretation: trade diversion accompanied by dependence on suppliers, expansion and concentration within chains, incompatibilities across spheres, and adjustments framed in terms of security rather than efficiency.

Process tracing does not seek generalization but explanation. The method is appropriate because the U.S.–China war constitutes a transformation affecting arrangements, networks, and behavior. By reconstructing sequences, the analysis clarifies how macro-level rivalry translates into micro-level developmental constraints.

4. Results and Discussion

4.1. Consequences for Developing Countries

The rivalry between the United States and China generates peripheral but consequential effects for developing countries through various mechanisms. These effects go beyond just trade volumes or price fluctuations. They reflect structural reordering of production networks, technological governance, and capital allocation. Consequences vary across countries, which depend on their position within supply chains.

One effect of tariff escalation is trade diversion. As barriers go up, firms move their sourcing to third countries. Several economies saw export gains in manufacturing as a result. Bystander countries increased exports of tariffed products, with gains concentrated among those capable of substituting production (Fajgelbaum et al., 2024). Southeast Asian economies benefited from the nomadic relocation of labor-intensive assembly and consumer goods. The reallocation of production toward third-country exporters has been there, with growth among economies integrated into manufacturing chains (C. L. Freund et al., 2020). However, these gains are disparate. Countries lacking infrastructure or stability capture limited benefits. Conflict therefore generates selective opportunity rather than advantage. This led to reinforcing hierarchies in production (Mattoo et al., 2023).

The more pivotal adjustment involves the restructuring of supply chains. Firms reduce exposure by relocating assembly, but at the same time, maintaining upstream sourcing from established hubs, in this case China. This produces a layered pattern where developing countries expand capacity while remaining dependent on imported goods. Countries experiencing export growth to the United States simultaneously increased imports from China. This reflects the relocation of production stages rather than a fundamental diversification of sources (Mattoo et al., 2023). Reports show that such restructuring results in vertical specialization. Developing economies become embedded in networks while remaining dependent on manufacturing centers (Jaax et al., 2023). This creates dual dependence: reliance on one power for inputs and another for markets. Such dependence increases exposure to policy shifts originating outside domestic control.

The expansion of export controls and competing standards generates a second effect: technological bifurcation. As economies impose restrictions on transfer and infrastructure, developing countries face barriers to accessing divergent ecosystems. Upgrading strategies depend on which framework a country joins. The standard fragmentation could stall growth by limiting knowledge distribution and driving up costs (Cevik, 2023). Countries adopting Chinese standards face a lock-out from Western markets. Those aligning with Western regimes may encounter barriers to Chinese networks. Competition narrows strategic flexibility and shapes development trajectories.

The conflict affects indeed on commodity distribution. Sourcing shifts in farming and energy create both openings and traps. For example, China's move away from U.S. agriculture helped Brazil and Argentina. However, relying on one giant buyer leaves exporters at the mercy of that buyer's leverage UNCTAD. Nations with critical minerals face a similar squeeze. While investment might climb, their resources become pawns in a larger game, stripping away their policy leeway (UNTAC, 2023).

Conflict generates consequences through financial channels. Reduced investment, altered capital flows, and increased volatility are byproducts of uncertainty in emerging markets. Assessments by the IMF show that policy uncertainty is associated with reduced investment and declining output expectations. Developing economies are disproportionately affected by fluctuations in demand and investor confidence (Cevik, 2023; IMF, 2020). The World Bank further documents that fragmentation can reduce income growth by limiting technology diffusion and increasing costs (World Bank, 2024).

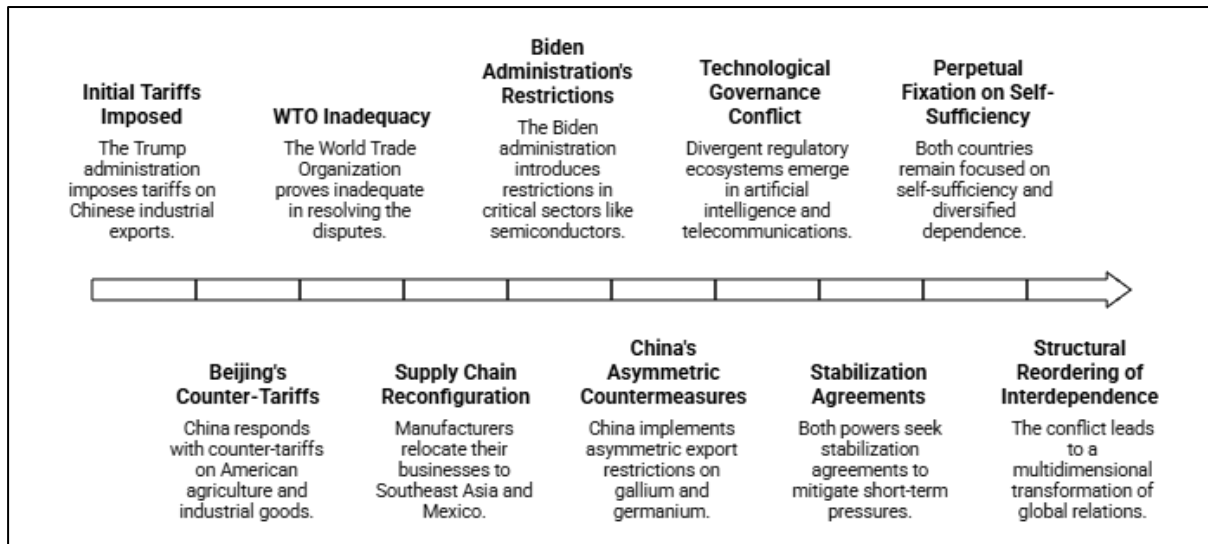


Figure 1. Development of US-China Trade War

These mechanisms produce a dual effect. In the short run, moving factories and diverting trade create export wins for those ready to catch the ball. In the long run, however, supply-chain shifts and tech splits deepen external dependence. Joining these new networks keeps economies busy, but hooks them into competing spheres of influence. Developing countries aren't being pushed out of globalization; they are being integrated into a system run by power politics rather than market logic.

4.2. Economic-Security Implications

Developing countries are caught in the middle of competing spheres of influence, as the United States and China, in their bid to attain technological self-sufficiency, increasingly decouple their technological industries. The Made in China 2025 plan by China and the CHIPS and Science Act by the United States, for particular instance, underscore the quest for technological hegemony in strategic industries such as semiconductors, artificial intelligence, and other critical technologies, which pose an imperative challenge to developing countries to make impossible choices between aligning with one of the two global spheres of influence or being left out of strategic technological ecosystems altogether (Moschella & Atkinson, 2020; Zhang, 2024). This represents a transformation of global economic-security nexus, where access to technology determines economic development. The situation is particularly exemplified in the context of semiconductor industries, where asymmetrical interdependencies create opportunities for dominant nations to weaponize technological network effects (Carnovale et al., 2025; Wasser et al., 2022), which potentially lead to an economic-security vulnerability.

The securitization of supply chains will directly impact the economy through various transmission channels. The evidence from existing literature clearly shows that the effects of geopolitical fragmentation will reduce the global income by limiting the diffusion of technology and imposing costs on transactions and established production networks (Catalan, 2024; World Bank, 2024). The impact of these effects will be felt by countries through limited access to capital flows, price volatility, and investment risks, all of which constitute channels of economic-security transmission (Cevik, 2023). The fragmentation of the payment system along geopolitical lines will likely fragment the financial system and reduce diversification and increase idiosyncratic risks (Catalan, 2024). The situation would worsen countries that are caught in the middle of these rivalries. They will have to deal with conflicting regulations, or standards, or compliance issues (Çevik, 2024), turning regulatory fragmentation into an economic-security constraint.

As both powers impose market access conditions along geopolitical lines, developing countries face difficult choices. The Southeast Asian countries are in a difficult situation as they are benefiting from the Belt and Road Initiative of China while at the same time aligning geopolitically with the USA (Bajpae, 2022; ISEAS, 2022). The decision of Indonesia to impose tariffs on Chinese goods to support domestic industries and Vietnam's manufacturing boom as industries shift from China and the Philippines' dependency on both China and the USA (Leon, 2024) are evidence of the difficult choices that these countries are making, since

domestic industrial policy becomes inseparable from economic-security positioning. Also, the formation of the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue and Supply Chain Resilience Initiative aiming at building supply chains are designed to exclude China. These would force countries to compromise on economic efficiency and align geopolitically (Benson et al., 2023; Vo, 2021).

A country's position in the global trade network determines how much it will suffer when political tensions disrupt business. Research indicates that those economies with export structures that substitute, as opposed to complementing, American and Chinese trade, and which also possess capacity for rapid scale, emerge as major beneficiaries of trade disruption (Fajgelbaum et al., 2024). However, even this 'opportunity' conceals a deeper dependency, with beneficiary economies becoming further embedded in global production networks dominated by rival powers, rather than developing their own structural capacities (Gentile et al., 2020; Mattoo et al., 2023). The economies of Africa, with a lack of diversified structural capacities and existing production potential, have seen a decline in export performance, even while other economies have benefited from trade diversion effects (Nantembelele et al., 2023; Olayungbo, 2019).

Maintaining strategic autonomy becomes increasingly difficult in the face of the changing institutional framework of global trade. The decline of multilateral dispute resolution mechanisms, driven by the paralysis of the World Trade Organization appellate body, eliminates the availability of neutral dispute resolution. This leaves nations to rely on bilateral power relations without institutional cover (Ciuriak, 2019; Hass, 2026). For developing countries, the challenge of maintaining non-aligned stances comes with the pressure of being forced to demonstrate allegiance to both nations. This creates what has been described as the new non-aligned movement, with nations trying to hold onto strategic space in an increasingly bipolar world (ISEAS, 2022; Quah, 2025). However, the possibility of non-alignment becomes increasingly difficult with both nations using economic interdependence as a tool of coercion, with targeted sanctions, export restrictions, and market access conditions being imposed (Farrell & Newman, 2019). For developing countries, every economic policy decision becomes a geopolitical issue in an increasingly bipolar world.

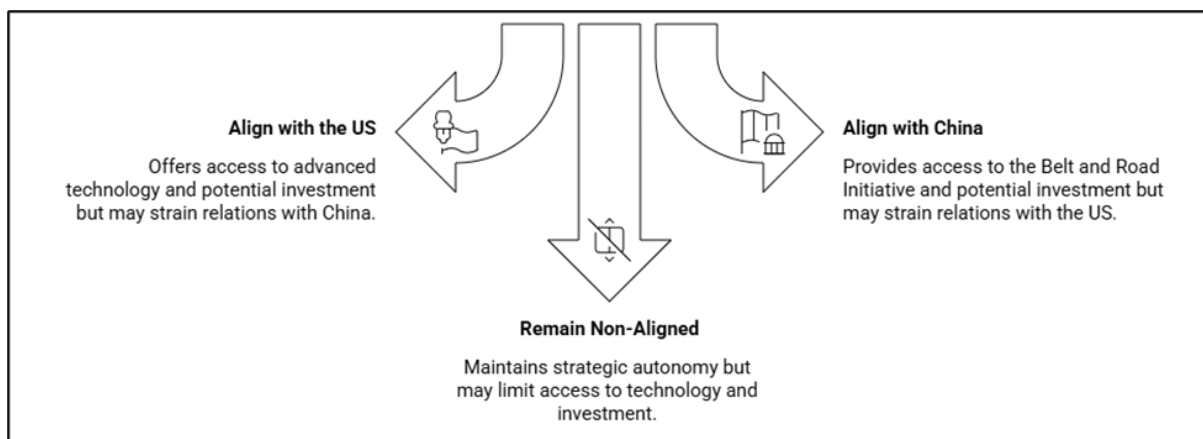


Figure 2. Developing Countries' Positions

The restructuring of global supply chains in response to competition between great powers significantly changes the risk-return equation for development strategies that rely on export-oriented growth and global value chain participation. While connector countries benefit in the short run from their role as intermediaries between rival powers, they also face new risks due to lengthened supply chains and indirect exposure to both powers (Campos et al., 2023; Ommeren, 2025). The shift from an efficiency-driven to a security-driven approach to supply chain management benefits developed economies that can afford to pay the necessary premium in reshoring and friend-shoring, while imposing demands on developing countries to align their economies without investing in production capabilities. Investment patterns increasingly depend on geopolitical rather than economic factors, with announced greenfield investments in China and Russia failing to materialize, while investments in geopolitically aligned economies increase strongly (Seong et al., 2024). This points to a future of globalization that is not one of decline or end, but one of restructuring along power-political rather than economic lines, where development opportunities are filtered through strategic relevance within the economic-security order.

4.3. Discussion

Strategic rivalry reconfigures interdependence from a source of restraint into an architect of exposure. The results in this study confirm this assumption. The trade war has reconfigured integration along lines of power competition. Developing countries find themselves embedded in networks where participation increases vulnerability. This pattern renders weaponized interdependence (Farrell & Newman, 2019) but extends it in three directions.

First, trade diversion rewards prior integration rather than creating new pathways. For instance, Vietnam and Mexico captured export gains because they already inhabited assembly networks (Jung, 2020); Sub-Saharan African economies saw no such windfall (UNDP, 2025). This reveals a short-term opportunity conceals long-term lock-in. Countries benefiting from relocation deepen their dependence on inputs from rival powers, but they are competing for access to contested markets. Trade diversion does not diversify dependence but reorders it instead.

Second, supply chain restructuring creates layered vulnerability. Companies relocated final assembly while maintaining Chinese sourcing. This produced simultaneous export growth to the United States and import growth from China. The pattern contradicts decoupling expectations. Firms pursue risk mitigation through geographic dispersion, yet they need to preserve efficiency through concentrated sourcing at the same time. Developing countries occupy nodes that relay production without controlling it. Disruption in either relationship threatens production (C. Freund et al., 2024).

Third, technology securitization flips interdependence into forced alignment. Export controls and infrastructure limits create bifurcated ecosystems. Countries have to opt between Chinese and Western standards. This way determines which markets remain accessible, which investment flows materialize, or which upgrade paths open (Yang, 2024). The choice becomes irreversible as switching costs climb. Strategic ambiguity proves unsustainable when technology systems require exclusive commitment.

These mechanisms produce feedback loops. Trade diversion embeds countries in production networks controlled by rival powers. Supply chain restructuring disperses assembly without diversifying sourcing. Technology bifurcation forecloses alternative pathways. Each mechanism reinforces the others. The result is not withdrawal from globalization but insertion into a system where economic participation generates political exposure.

The implications challenge conventional development strategy. Export-oriented growth models assumed that integration would create upgrading opportunities through technology transfer. This logic rested on the premise that production networks operated according to efficiency rather than security (McKinnon, 1964). The trade war demonstrates that networks can reorganize around strategic concerns without collapsing. Developing countries remain embedded in networks but occupy positions defined by their role in great power competition rather than comparative advantage.

Dispute settlements, in turn, would shift from institutional channels (like WTO as a conventional way) to bilateral negotiations, most likely under power asymmetry. Economic policy becomes subject to political pressure. Countries choose alignment not because it serves development interests but because refusing generates costs they cannot absorb. The findings also clarify limits of non-alignment. Southeast Asian countries, for example, swing to keep ties with both powers while avoiding too much commitment (Kuik, 2024). As competition intensified, the room for ambiguity narrowed. Export controls require compliance verification. Infrastructure investment demands exclusivity agreements. Technology standards prove incompatible. Non-alignment becomes untenable because both powers impose conditions that make neutrality unworkable.

The trade war represents a structural shift rather than cyclical disruption. Conventional trade conflicts occurred within a framework where states accepted interdependence as beneficial. The current rivalry questions this premise. Both powers pursue partial decoupling in strategic sectors while maintaining integration in others. This creates segmented systems where some domains remain governed by efficiency and others by security. For developing countries, navigating this system demands choices between integration and autonomy. The current system demands alignment as the price of integration in which economic participation and political subordination become inseparable.

5. Conclusion

The trade war between the U.S. and China depicts a fundamental change in global economic governance. It is a shift from interdependence as a driver of mutual benefits towards an instrument of strategic competition between states. For developing countries, this is an asymmetric risk. It manifests through trade diversion (which rewards existing capacity while also increasing dependency on rival powers) alignment risks (which require impossible choices between economic integration and strategic sovereignty) and supply chain securitization (which transforms participation in global value chains into a geopolitical liability). The evidence clearly indicates that, rather than representing a temporary disruption, the trade war fundamentally reorganizes the relationship between economics and security, at least within the global system.

The implications extend beyond economics towards a redefinition of development possibilities, with states that do not hold strategic value for either power facing constrained policy options due to alignment risks, regulatory fragmentation, and a lack of multilateral dispute resolution options. Those that sit between rival blocs, by contrast, will enjoy an advantage but also a new set of risks related to lengthened global supply chains and indirect exposure to both rival powers. The capacity for trade diversion also highlights how structural position within global value chains will determine whether fragmentation represents constraint or opportunity, with implications that vary across different regions and levels of productive capacity.

The implication for the future is that development strategies that depend on a neutral integration with global markets will face challenging circumstances. Global system characterized by a trade war between two global powers forces countries to leave multilateral regimes for bilateral tables. This redefines how states interact with global markets, specifically how economies integrate and how developing states must adapt in a more political sense. If developing countries wish to maintain a degree of sovereignty while still accessing the resources, markets, and technologies that will be necessary for continued development in an increasingly hostile global system, they must transition from passive market participation to strategic and diversified diplomatic partaking.

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