



Implications of Tariff Regimes and Reciprocity on Global Peace and International Relations

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Abstract

The dynamics of global peace and international relations are profoundly influenced by tariff regimes and principles of reciprocity in trade. This paper examines the multifaceted implications of these economic constructs on the geopolitical landscape, arguing that the evolution of tariff policies can serve as both a catalyst for cooperation and a source of conflict among nations. In an interconnected world, trade tariffs act as instruments of economic power, capable of shaping alliances and fostering dependencies, while also inciting tensions that may lead to trade wars and geopolitical strife. The reciprocity principle, which promotes mutual concessions in trade negotiations, is crucial in maintaining equilibrium and fostering trust between nations. However, disparities in economic strength and divergent national interests can complicate these interactions, potentially undermining peace efforts. Through a historical analysis of key tariff agreements and disputes, this study highlights how shifts in tariff regimes reflect broader geopolitical changes and impact international relations. The findings suggest that while strategic tariff implementation can enhance diplomatic ties and contribute to global stability, protectionism and retaliatory measures can exacerbate conflicts and undermine collaborative efforts. Ultimately, recognizing the interplay between tariff regimes and the principles of reciprocity is essential for policymakers striving to promote peace and foster beneficial international relations in an increasingly globalized economy. This analysis further delves into specific case studies where tariff regimes have played a critical role in shaping diplomatic relations, such as the U.S.-China trade relations and the implications of the European Union's Common External Tariff. Additionally, it explores how multilateral trade agreements and organizations, such as the World Trade Organization, function to mediate between national interests and foster cooperative trade relations that can mitigate conflict. This review paper explores the multifaceted relationship between tariff regimes, the principle of reciprocity in international trade, and their broader implications for global peace and international relations. By analyzing historical precedents, theoretical frameworks, and contemporary case studies, this paper reveals how economic instruments traditionally viewed through a domestic policy lens can significantly shape geopolitical stability and cooperation. The findings underscore the dual nature of trade policy, serving as both a catalyst for conflict and a platform for peace building.

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1. Introduction

In an increasingly interconnected world, the dynamics of global trade and international relations have undergone significant transformations, particularly in the realm of tariff regimes and the principle of reciprocity (Aron, 2017). Tariff regimes, which dictate the taxes imposed on imported goods, play a critical role in shaping economic policies and relations between nations (Meershoek, 2023; Keohane, 2020). The principle of reciprocity, in turn, refers to the practice of countries granting each other equivalent concessions in trade policies, fostering mutual cooperation or, conversely, escalating trade disputes.

The implications of these elements can profoundly impact global peace and international relations, making them vital topics of study in contemporary political and economic discourse (Klotz, 2018). The escalation of tariff regimes has been particularly pronounced in recent years, where trade wars and protectionist policies have emerged as prominent features of international trade. The United States-China trade conflict that began in 2018 exemplifies this trend, where both nations imposed tariffs on hundreds of billions of dollars' worth of goods, thereby destabilizing existing trade networks (Bown & Irwin, 2021; Simmons, 2010). The subsequent retaliatory measures taken by involved parties not only heightened tensions but also raised concerns regarding the potential for broader geopolitical conflicts (Lee & Koo, 2022). Such scenarios illustrate how tariff regimes can act as catalysts for discord, leading to a re-evaluation of alliances and relationships among nations. Reciprocity in trade agreements, while theoretically designed to promote fairness and equity, can also lead to competitive de-escalation and defensive stances among nations (Salacuse, 2010). The "tit-for-tat" dynamics that often accompany reciprocal trade policies can escalate conflicts rather than resolve them, as evidenced by various incidents where countries retaliate with additional tariffs in response to perceived unfair trade practices (Fernandez & Ghosh, 2023). This cycle of retaliation can not only disrupt economic ties but also create an environment of mistrust, potentially spilling over into wider geopolitical relations.

Moreover, the implications of tariff regimes extend beyond economic borders, influencing social and political relationships. Economic distress brought about by heavy tariffs can lead to domestic unrest and political instability, which, in turn, affect international relations (Stevanović *et al.*, 2023). The "squeeze on the consumer" effect, where increased tariffs lead to higher prices for imported goods—can drive public discontent and challenge existing governance structures (Jovanović *et al.*, 2023; McDonald, 2009). Such internal strife might compel national leaders to adopt more isolationist or aggressive foreign policies as a means to redirect public frustration and foster nationalistic sentiment (Hoekman & Kosteci, 2009). The interplay of tariff regimes and reciprocity has significant ramifications for global peace, particularly as nations navigate the complexities of economic interdependence against a backdrop of rising nationalism and protectionism (Obregon, 2022; McDonald, 2004). In a global environment riddled with uncertainty, it is imperative to examine how trade policies can either be a tool for establishing robust international partnerships or a source of conflict that jeopardizes global stability. As scholars and practitioners alike strive for peaceful resolutions to trade disputes, understanding the nuanced relationship between tariff regimes and international relations becomes essential (Goldstein *et al.*, 2007).

2. Theoretical Framework

The nexus between trade and peace is rooted in classical liberal theory, which posits that economic interdependence reduces the likelihood of conflict (Kantian Peace Theory). Realist perspectives, conversely, view trade as a tool for power projection, with tariffs functioning as instruments of economic warfare (Baena-Rojas & Herrero-Olarte, 2020). These opposing paradigms inform the diverse policy applications of tariffs and reciprocity, influencing both

bilateral and multilateral engagements.

2.1 Tariff Regimes: Protectionism and Its Consequences;

Tariff regimes play a pivotal role in shaping international trade dynamics and can significantly impact global peace and international relations (Zeiler, 2022). At their core, tariff regimes are used by countries as tools of protectionism, established to shield domestic industries from foreign competition. While the ostensible goal of these measures is to bolster local economies and protect jobs, the underlying consequences can ripple through the fabric of international relations, impacting diplomacy, trade balances, and even security dynamics (Heto, 2023; Kertzer, & Rathbun, 2015). Nations of the world may invoke protectionism to defend emerging industries from global competition, ensure national security by reducing dependency on foreign goods, or respond to domestic political pressures. However, reliance on such protective measures can lead to an escalation of tensions between countries. When one nation imposes tariffs, target countries may retaliate with their own import duties, creating a cycle of trade wars that can significantly strain bilateral and multilateral relationships (Aggarwal & Chow, 2010). The economic consequences of these tariff regimes are profound and multifaceted. On one hand, while domestic industries may initially benefit from reduced competition, consumers often face higher prices and fewer choices as a result of increased tariffs (Goldstein, 2022). Over time, such measures can stifle innovation and economic growth by limiting market access and discouraging foreign investment (Goldstein, 2022; Phelan, 2012). These economic strains can heighten national grievances and contribute to instability, undermining efforts to foster global peace. Relatedly, tariff regimes can alter the landscape of international alliances. Countries may find themselves realigning politically and economically based on trade partnerships rather than mutual interests in peace and cooperation. For instance, nations that heavily rely on trade may unite against a common economic adversary, thereby shaping geopolitical alliances around economic interests rather than shared values or ideologies. Meanwhile, the social and political implications of protectionism cannot be overlooked (Oatley, 2022). This is as tariffs regime create economic winners and losers within countries, they may exacerbate social inequalities and lead to domestic unrest. In light of these challenges, exploring alternatives to protectionism becomes essential for fostering a cooperative global environment (Rana, 2015). Approaches such as fair trade agreements, investment in local innovation, and international collaboration on shared challenges can provide pathways to support domestic industries while maintaining a commitment to global stability. Multilateral organizations also serve a crucial role in encouraging countries to pursue free trade, which can lead to economic interdependence and, potentially, a reduction in the likelihood of conflicts (Gao, 2022; Goldstein, 2022). In summary, while tariff regimes rooted in protectionism may provide short-term benefits to domestic industries, their long-term implications can be detrimental to global peace and international relations. A careful balance must be struck between protecting national interests and fostering an inclusive international trading environment that promotes cooperation, stability, and mutual prosperity (Gaines, 2022; Cohn, 2017). Recognizing the interconnectedness of the global economy is vital in striving for a harmonious world where countries work collaboratively rather than in adversarial isolation.

Table 1: Comparison of Tariff Regimes and Their Strategic Objectives

Tariff Regime	Primary Objective	Typical Outcome	Example Country
Protectionist Tariff	Protect domestic industries	Trade distortion, retaliation	United States (2018–2020)
Liberal Tariff Policy	Promote free trade	Increased imports, reduced conflicts	EU (Post-WTO accession)
Strategic Tariff	Gain leverage in diplomacy	Trade wars, diplomatic strain	China (vs. Australia, US)

2.2 Economic Nationalism and Strategic Competition; Trade war and diplomatic frictions

Tariffs are often used to shield domestic industries, but this protectionist approach can inflame nationalist sentiment and provoke adversarial responses. Historical examples, such as the Smoot-Hawley Tariff Act (1930), demonstrate how aggressive tariff policies can contribute to economic downturns and rising international hostility.

In the recent time, the trade confrontations, particularly the U.S.-China trade war—illustrate how tariff escalations strain bilateral relations. These disputes often spill over into broader geopolitical tensions, affecting cooperation on issues such as climate change, security, and global health. Consequently, between 2020 and 2023, economic nationalism has surged as a dominant theme in global trade, leading to intensified strategic competition among nations. Fueled by the COVID-19 pandemic, governments have increasingly prioritized domestic interests, often at the expense of international cooperation (Moravcsik, 2013). The pandemic exposed vulnerabilities in supply chains and highlighted the risks associated with heavy reliance on foreign goods (Friedrichs, 2022). As a response, many countries adopted protectionist measures, exemplified by the United States' renewed commitment to "America First" policies under the Biden administration. Such policies often manifest as tariff increases or the promotion of local manufacturing, thereby heightening tensions with trading partners, particularly China. The U.S.-China trade relationship serves as a focal point for understanding this dynamic, as both nations engaged in tit-for-tat tariff measures that escalated diplomatic frictions and disrupted existing trade networks (Bown, 2023; IMF, 2023). Strategic competition has further complicated the landscape of international relations, particularly in the context of emerging economies vying for greater influence. As countries accelerate their economic and military growth, the geopolitical stakes surrounding trade have increased (Keohane, 2012). For example, China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has been perceived by the U.S. and its allies as an attempt by Beijing to expand its sphere of influence and challenge existing Western-dominated trade frameworks. This has triggered defensive measures in South-East Asia, where nations are increasingly caught in between choosing sides, leading to regional frictions and realignments (Gupta & Raghavan, 2023). The 2021 AUKUS agreement between Australia, the UK, and the U.S. further exemplifies this shift, signaling a desire to counter China's influence in the Indo-Pacific region, thereby exacerbating the zero-sum mentality prevalent in contemporary trade discourse (Baker & Cavallo, 2021). The impact of economic nationalism extends beyond trade tariffs to broader diplomatic relationships, often straining alliances built on economic cooperation. Countries utilizing protectionist measures may find initial short-term domestic benefits; however, the long-term implications may undermine trust and collaborative efforts among trade partners. As nations retaliate against tariffs with their own measures, the cycle of economic gentleness quickly deteriorates into competitive de-escalation, fostering an

environment of hostility and mistrust (Zeng & Liang, 2022; Copelovitch, & Pevehouse, 2013). For instance, the ongoing U.S.-China trade conflict has not only led to economic repercussions but has also infiltrated global discourses on climate change and human rights, as both countries leverage economic ties to influence broader geopolitical agendas (Lee & Koo, 2022).

Moreover, the rise of populist movements in various countries further complicates the dynamics of economic nationalism. Politicians often frame international trade in terms of national sovereignty and security, tapping into public sentiment that is increasingly wary of globalism. This shift can lead to a backlash against multilateral trade agreements, as seen with recent challenges facing the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) amidst rising nationalism across the continent (Oxfam, 2020). As political leaders adopt more protectionist stances, the vision of collaborative global trade becomes increasingly nebulous, raising concerns about the future of international diplomatic relations and the potential for conflicts. In summary, the intersection of economic nationalism and strategic competition has generated a precarious landscape between 2020 and 2023, characterized by trade wars and diplomatic frictions (Oatley, 2011). As nations grapple with the economics of isolationism versus interdependence, the geopolitical climate grows more complex and fraught with potential for conflict (Grosse *et al.*, 2023). Policymakers must navigate these tensions carefully, balancing the desire to safeguard domestic interests with the need for constructive international cooperation. Without a concerted effort to prioritize diplomacy and mutual benefit, the risks of escalating trade conflicts loom large.

**Fig 1:** Timeline of Major Trade Wars and Diplomatic Frictions (2000–2023)

2.3 Reciprocity: A Principle of Fairness or Escalation

Reciprocity is a fundamental principle found in various contexts, including social interactions, economics, and international relations. It typically refers to the practice of responding to an action with a corresponding action, often with the expectation that one good turn deserves another. However, the nature of reciprocity can be seen through two different lenses: as a principle of fairness or as a potential source of escalation (Gehrke, 2022). The concept of reciprocity in trade and international relations has become a focal point of both cooperation and conflict. Traditionally, reciprocity has been understood as a principle of fairness, where nations agree to offer mutual concessions in trade agreements to foster equitable cooperation. However, the complexities of contemporary geopolitics have illuminated how this principle can equally lead to escalation and tit-for-tat responses, which may exacerbate existing tensions among countries (Bernauer *et al.*, 2010). During this period, as nations navigated the fallout from the COVID-19 pandemic, the dynamic of reciprocity took on heightened importance, influencing trade policies and shaping diplomatic interactions globally. Many countries have embraced the principle of reciprocity to strengthen their bargaining positions in international trade negotiations (Phelan, 2012). This approach was visible in the negotiations surrounding the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), which aimed to reduce tariffs and enhance trade flows among member nations in Asia-Pacific. By promoting reciprocal concessions, the agreement was designed to create a more balanced trading environment and foster greater economic interdependence (Gupta & Raghavan, 2023). However, while such agreements illustrate the potential for reciprocity to serve as a mechanism for cooperation, they also spotlight the risks of escalation that arise when countries perceive unfair treatment or concessions that are not reciprocated in kind (Reinhardt & Lutmar, 2022). The principle of reciprocity can lead to a cycle of retaliatory measures, particularly noticeable in the context of U.S.-China relations, where tariffs have been extensively used as tools of economic negotiation. As both nations implemented tariffs on a range of goods in response to perceived unfair trade practices, the environment shifted from one of cooperation to one of competitive de-escalation. In this scenario, reciprocity transformed from a principle of fairness into a trigger for escalation, where each country's retaliatory actions reinforced hostility and deepened distrust between the two powers (Lee & Koo, 2022; Bown, 2023). This pattern of tit-for-tat actions illustrates how the principle can backfire, transforming diplomatic engagement into a battleground characterized by economic warfare.

Furthermore, the notion of constructive versus destructive reciprocity has become significant in understanding how nations interact within the global trading system (Benabdallah, 2022). Recent literature highlights the potential for constructive reciprocity to establish equitable negotiations and enhance compliance with international norms, as seen in various multilateral trade agreements (Lehmann, 2021). However, when nations resort to punitive measures in response to perceived slights, constructive reciprocity can quickly devolve into a cycle of hostility. This tendency underscores the precarious balance that policymakers must maintain when implementing reciprocal trade policies, as failure to navigate this landscape thoughtfully can escalate conflicts rather than resolve them (Oatley, 2022; McKenzie, 2020). Moreover, the impact of

economic nationalism on the principle of reciprocity cannot be overlooked. Nations struggling with protectionist pressures may invoke reciprocity as justification for imposing trade barriers, framing their actions as necessary for national interests. For example, developed countries often pressure developing nations into reciprocal agreements that disproportionately favor them, leading to imbalances in the global trading framework (Oxfam, 2020). This dynamic not only complicates the idea of fairness inherent in reciprocity but also risks alienating smaller economies, which may be less able to respond effectively to protectionist measures from larger partners.

In view therefore, the principle of reciprocity, while theoretically grounded in fairness, has shown its dual nature between 2020 and 2023. As nations engage in reciprocal trade practices, the line between cooperation and escalation becomes increasingly blurred (Odezuligbo *et al.*, 2024). Understanding how reciprocity can serve as both a facilitator of collaboration and a catalyst for conflict is crucial for policymakers striving for a balanced approach to international relations in an increasingly polarized world (Shih, 2022). Navigating this complex landscape will require strategic foresight and a commitment to fostering fair trade practices that promote mutual benefit rather than punitive responses.

2.4 Constructive Reciprocity

Constructive reciprocity has emerged as a crucial framework for understanding international trade dynamics and diplomacy between 2020 and 2023. It is grounded in the idea that countries can achieve mutual benefits by engaging in cooperative economic practices that promote fairness and equality (Aggarwal & Reddie, 2021). As nations began to recover from the economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, the principle of constructive reciprocity became particularly relevant. It highlighted the necessity of meaningful engagement through fair trade agreements and multilateral collaborations aimed at strengthening economic interdependence while mitigating tensions (Bulman, 2022). This approach underscores the shift from a combative to a collaborative mindset in international relations, where economic ties can serve as instruments of peace rather than conflict. Recent studies have illustrated the role of constructive reciprocity in fostering positive trade relations. For instance, the implementation of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) in late 2020 exemplified how member states prioritized cooperation through reciprocal tariff reductions and commitments to free trade (Gupta & Raghavan, 2023). By emphasizing mutual concessions, RCEP aimed to establish a stable economic environment that benefits all parties involved, particularly in a post-pandemic recovery context. The agreement is characterized by its inclusivity, bringing together not only major economies like China and Japan but also smaller ASEAN nations, thereby promoting a balanced multilateral trading system (Bown, 2023; Griffiths *et al.*, 2008).

In addition, the concept of constructive reciprocity has also been advanced in dialogues within organizations like the World Trade Organization (WTO). Amid criticism of protectionist tendencies and unilateral trade actions from major economies, WTO member states have engaged in discussions about how to enhance constructive reciprocity as a means to restore faith in the multilateral trading system (Lehmann, 2021). For instance, the introduction of "joint

initiatives” aims at creating cooperative environments where member countries can agree on mutual trade practices that enhance compliance and foster stability (Baker & Cavallo, 2021). Such initiatives underscore the importance of dialogue and collective action in mitigating disputes, thereby enhancing the potential for reciprocal agreements that are beneficial for all parties involved. Moreover, the post-pandemic landscape has necessitated greater emphasis on constructive reciprocity in response to emerging global challenges, including climate change and public health. As nations grappled with the repercussions of the pandemic, trade agreements increasingly encompassed environmental and health standards, with an understanding that cooperation in these areas could yield long-term benefits for all (Oxfam, 2020). The European Union's Green Deal and its trade implications serve as an illustrative case where countries work reciprocally to promote sustainable practices and establish a trading environment centered on shared goals (Rosato & Wolford, 2020). These initiatives not only address pressing global issues but also create a framework of trust and cooperation among trading partners.

Constructive reciprocity also highlights the significance of addressing inequalities in international trade practices, particularly between developed and developing nations. Power dynamics often skew negotiations in favor of wealthier countries, leading to imbalanced agreements that do not provide proportionate benefits to less developed economies (Grosse *et al.*, 2021). Scholars argue that a robust framework for constructive reciprocity must include considerations for "special and differential treatment" for developing nations, ensuring that their unique challenges are acknowledged in global trade agreements (Oatley, 2022; UNCTAD, 2021). This approach can promote inclusivity while avoiding the pitfalls of exploitation that arise from traditional trade practices, ultimately contributing to a more equitable global trading system. Notably, constructive reciprocity has emerged as an essential principle guiding international trade negotiations between 2020 and 2023. By fostering cooperation through mutual concessions and equitable agreements, this framework emphasizes the potential for trade to function as a vehicle for positive diplomatic relations. As nations increasingly recognize the importance of collective action in addressing shared challenges, the focus on constructive reciprocity promises a more stable and collaborative global trading system, one that prioritizes fairness and mutual benefit over competition and conflict (Hua & Zeng, 2022).

2.5 Impact on Developing Nations and Global Equity

The impact of tariff regimes, trade policies, and principles of reciprocity on developing nations has become increasingly significant between 2020 and 2023. As nations globally navigated the economic challenges imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic and rising economic nationalism, the disparities between developed and developing countries were magnified (Chan, 2022). Trade policies that may seem beneficial in a general context often impose substantial burdens on developing nations, thus impacting global equity and exacerbating existing inequalities. One of the most alarming trends has been the resurgence of protectionism, where developed countries have adopted tariffs and trade barriers ostensibly to shield their economies from external pressures (Bown, 2023). For instance, the United States reintroduced tariffs on various goods, particularly targeting nations like

China, which led to retaliatory tariffs that disrupted global supply chains. Developing countries, many of which rely heavily on exports of agricultural commodities and raw materials, found it increasingly difficult to compete in a landscape marked by increasing barriers. According to a report from the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2021, tariff escalations disproportionately affected developing countries, leading to a reduction in trade volumes and difficulties in accessing markets (WTO, 2021; Hakimdavar, 2013). These barriers not only inhibit key export opportunities but also stifle economic growth and development in these nations.

In addition to trade barriers, the principle of reciprocity often leaves developing nations at a disadvantage in international agreements. While reciprocity is intended to create fairness in trade negotiations, in practice, it tends to favor more powerful economies that can dictate the terms of engagement (Drezner, 2019). Wealthier nations frequently impose stringent conditions on developing countries, demanding concessions that may not be matched in return (Oxfam, 2020). For example, developing nations are often pressured to lower tariffs on their exports without receiving equivalent access to developed markets, resulting in imbalanced agreements (UNCTAD, 2021). This undermines efforts to establish a more equitable global trading system and perpetuates a cycle of dependency and vulnerability among developing economies.

Relatedly, the effects of the pandemic further complicated the already fragile economic status of many developing countries (Ike *et al.*, 2025). As wealthy nations turned inward to protect their economies, emerging markets faced severe declines in external demand and investment (IMF, 2023). For instance, GDP growth forecasts for sub-Saharan Africa lagged significantly behind global averages, showcasing a widening gap that threatens regional stability (IMF, 2022). Governments in these regions have struggled to implement recovery strategies, often lacking the financial resources and support necessary to rebound effectively. This situation fosters greater inequality and prompts fears of social unrest and political instability, exacerbating the challenges of governance and development. The intersection of global equity and trade practices is further highlighted in discussions surrounding climate change and sustainability (Drezner, 2019). Developing nations, which contribute the least to global carbon emissions, are often the first to experience the adverse effects of climate shifts. However, their voices are frequently marginalized in international negotiations, where developed nations prioritize their interests over equitable solutions (Oxfam, 2020). As seen in dialogues related to the Paris Agreement, developed countries have historically failed to meet their financial commitments to support developing nations in their climate adaptation efforts. This disparity in responsibility highlights the pressing need for a global trading framework that accords developing nations recognition and support, particularly in transitioning toward sustainable development. Basically, the impact on developing nations and global equity in the recent times underscores the urgent need for a reassessment of trade practices and international relations (Gulo & Dwiastuti, 2022). Trade policies that prioritize protectionism over cooperation ultimately undermine not only the economic viability of developing nations but also the broader aspirations of global equity. As the world confronts complex challenges ranging from economic recovery post-pandemic

to climate change, fair trade practices that prioritize inclusive growth and equitable access will be paramount in promoting stability and prosperity across all nations.

2.5.1 Economic Challenges Faced by Developing Nations

It is interesting to note that over times, the developing nations have encountered a multitude of economic challenges exacerbated by systemic vulnerabilities, global events, and evolving trade dynamics. The COVID-19 pandemic serves as a pivotal backdrop, highlighting existing inequalities while also introducing new hurdles in economic development and stability (Freeman *et al.*, 2022). As nations struggled with health crises and economic contractions, the repercussions for developing economies were particularly severe, jeopardizing their growth prospects and undermining previous advancements. One of the most pressing economic challenges faced by developing nations is the substantial decline in foreign direct investment (FDI), which is critical for growth and development. According to the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD, 2021), global FDI flows fell sharply during the pandemic, with developing countries experiencing a disproportionate decline. A significant reduction in investment diverted attention away from crucial sectors, such as infrastructure and renewable energy, which are essential for long-term economic sustainability. The World Bank (2022) reported that many developing nations, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa, have faced reduced capital inflows, which has impeded their ability to recover from economic downturns and address pressing social issues like poverty and unemployment (Wujie, 2023). Trade disruptions have also posed significant challenges for developing nations, as their economies are often heavily reliant on exports of agricultural products and raw materials. Trade policies implemented by developed nations, such as increased tariffs and protectionist measures, have further marginalized developing countries in the global trading system. For instance, the United States-China trade war created supply chain disruptions that affected many developing countries, leaving them caught in the middle of escalating tariff conflicts (Bown, 2023). Additionally, as reported by the International Monetary Fund (IMF, 2023), unequal access to vaccine distribution during the pandemic hindered developing nations' recovery trajectories, limiting their engagement in the global market and effectively isolating them economically.

Furthermore, the interplay between climate change and economic challenges poses a significant threat to developing nations. Vulnerable populations are disproportionately affected by climate-related events, such as droughts, floods, and extreme weather patterns, which undermine agricultural productivity and food security (Oxfam, 2020). The UN's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC, 2022) emphasizes that developing countries are not only more susceptible to the impacts of climate change but are also often ill-equipped to adapt due to limited financial resources (Ike *et al.*, 2024). This exacerbates existing inequalities and constrains efforts for sustainable development, creating a vicious cycle of poverty and economic vulnerability. The reliance on commodity exports, coupled with fluctuating global prices, remains a persistent challenge for many developing nations. Commodity price volatility can lead to significant economic instability, with countries experiencing boom-and-bust cycles that threaten fiscal sustainability (World Bank, 2022). The International Monetary Fund

(2023) highlights that emerging economies often struggle with balancing their budgets in times of declining commodity prices, which can result in cuts to essential public services and social spending. This economic fragility undermines long-term development and exacerbates inequality within these nations, as vulnerable populations are disproportionately impacted by budgetary constraints (Orbie *et al.*, 2022).

Finally, the ongoing challenge of debt dependency has grown more acute for many developing countries in the post-pandemic landscape. With increasing borrowing to finance recovery efforts, several nations have found themselves entrenched in cycles of debt that hinder their ability to invest in critical sectors such as health, education, and infrastructure (IMF, 2022). The G20 Debt Service Suspension Initiative (DSSI) provided some temporary relief; however, many countries still face the daunting task of servicing debt obligations without sufficient economic growth. As the World Bank (2023) indicates, this debt burden can stymie progress toward achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), compelling governments to prioritize debt repayment over essential public investments. Conclusively, the economic challenges faced by developing nations between 2020 and 2023 are multifaceted, exacerbating existing inequalities and vulnerabilities within these economies. The impacts of reduced foreign investment, trade disruptions, climate change, commodity price volatility, and escalating debt underscore the urgent need for international cooperation and support (Hollifield, 2000; Oyeyemi, 2022). Addressing these challenges is essential not only for developing nations' recovery but also for promoting global equity and sustainable development in an increasingly interconnected world. It is imperative to note that the World Trade Organization (WTO) reported in 2021 that tariff escalations could lead to decreased trade volumes, impacting developing countries disproportionately. Many of these nations depend heavily on exports of agricultural products and raw materials, where tariff rates tend to be higher. For instance, research by the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD, 2021; Gao, 2022) found that developing countries faced an average tariff of 12.5% on their agricultural goods compared to 3.6% for developed nations. These tariffs constrain their ability to compete in global markets and can lead to revenue losses, as seen in countries reliant on commodity exports during heightened trade tensions.

2.5.2. Reciprocity in Trade Agreements

Reciprocity as a principle in trade agreements has garnered significant attention from policymakers and scholars between 2020 and 2023. Defined as the mutual exchange of concessions, this principle aims to establish fairer and more balanced trade relationships among nations. However, the practical application of reciprocity often reveals complex dynamics that can influence negotiation outcomes, exacerbate tensions, or foster cooperation. This period saw various trade agreements integrating reciprocal elements, reflecting differing national interests and capacities, particularly in the context of an evolving global economic landscape impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. One notable instance of reciprocity in trade agreements is the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), signed in November 2020. This agreement, which includes fifteen Asia-Pacific nations, is the world's largest free trade

agreement and places a significant emphasis on reciprocal commitments among member states (Gupta & Raghavan, 2023; Oni, 2025). By fostering mutual concessions, RCEP is seen as a way to enhance economic interdependence in the region while reducing tariffs and promoting trade in goods and services. The agreement also reflects an effort to establish a cooperative economic framework amidst growing geopolitical tensions, particularly between the U.S. and China. The principles of reciprocity embodied within RCEP serve to strengthen regional ties while simultaneously addressing concerns about economic nationalism and unilateral trade actions. However, the effectiveness of reciprocal trade agreements often encounters challenges, particularly due to the disparities in economic power among nations. Developing countries frequently find themselves at a disadvantage in reciprocal negotiations, where wealthier nations can demand concessions without offering equivalent benefits in return (Oni *et al.*, 2018; Oxfam, 2020). Critics argue that this imbalance underscores the need for equitable trade practices that genuinely consider the unique circumstances of less developed economies (UNCTAD, 2021). For example, in agricultural trade, developed countries often maintain high tariff barriers while requiring developing nations to lower their tariffs, which can undermine local economies and exacerbate inequalities (World Bank, 2022).

Moreover, the evolving context of trade agreements has led to increased scrutiny of the reciprocal commitments made by nations. In many instances, the principle of reciprocity has been weaponized, leading to retaliatory measures that escalate trade tensions. The U.S.-China trade conflict is an illustrative case where the invocation of reciprocity resulted in a tit-for-tat scenario, undermining diplomatic relations and instigating a cycle of protectionist policies (Bown, 2023). The punitive application of reciprocity, rather than its

constructive use, demonstrates the potential for trade agreements to devolve into conflicts rather than avenues for cooperation, complicating the objectives of multilateral engagement (Lee & Koo, 2022; John and Oyeyemi, 2022). Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic reshaped the discourse surrounding reciprocity in trade agreements, as nations recognized the need for collaboration on essential goods and services, especially concerning healthcare and public health security. The pandemic exposed vulnerabilities in global supply chains, prompting nations to engage in negotiations that emphasized reciprocal commitments in areas such as vaccine access and medical supplies. For example, the COVAX initiative aimed to ensure equitable vaccine distribution, participating nations emphasized the importance of reciprocity in addressing global health crises (Oxfam, 2020). This shift in understanding reciprocity illustrates how nations can leverage mutual cooperation to achieve common goals, demonstrating the potential for trade agreements to transcend traditional competitive frameworks. Understandably, reciprocity in trade agreements between 2020 and 2025 reflects a complex interplay of cooperation and conflict. While the principle aims to foster equitable trade relationships, the disparities in economic power and the politicization of reciprocity can shape negotiation outcomes significantly. The experiences of various trade agreements during this period highlight the need for a more balanced approach, particularly in recognizing the unique challenges faced by developing nations. Moving forward, it is vital for policymakers to prioritize constructive reciprocity that promotes genuine cooperation and fairness, thereby enhancing the potential for sustainable and inclusive global trade (Adeshina *et al.*, 2025). Expectedly, this ongoing trade tension may result in mistrust and hinder cooperative international relations, as developing countries feel sidelined in global economic discussions (World Bank, 2023).

Table 2: Reciprocity in Trade Agreements – Impact on Developing vs. Developed Nations

Aspect	Developed Nations	Developing Nations
Bargaining Power	High	Low
Market Access	Broad and diversified	Limited and vulnerable
Tariff Concessions	More strategic	Often pressured or conditional
Benefit from Reciprocity	Maximized	Uneven, sometimes negative

2.5.3 Global Equity and Ongoing Inequalities;

The years 2020 to 2023 have seen significant discourse surrounding global equity and the persistent inequalities that impact economic development and social stability across nations. The COVID-19 pandemic underscored these disparities, revealing profound inequities in health outcomes, economic resilience, and access to resources. As countries grappled with the repercussions of the pandemic, the shortcomings of existing global systems became glaringly apparent, necessitating urgent discussions on equity in economic recovery and the redistribution of resources (Koddenbrock & Mertens, 2022). The pandemic exacerbated existing inequalities between developed and developing nations, significantly impacting access to vaccines and healthcare resources. Reports indicated that wealthier countries acquired vaccines at significantly higher rates, often stockpiling doses while many low-income nations struggled to secure adequate supplies (Oxfam, 2020). A study by the World Health Organization (WHO, 2021) found that as of mid-2021, low-income countries had received only a fraction of the vaccine doses compared to their wealthier

counterparts, highlighting the stark inequities in global health resources (Tajoli, 2022). This vaccine gap not only affected public health outcomes but also hampered economic recovery efforts, as countries unable to vaccinate their populations faced prolonged lockdowns and economic downturns. In terms of economic recovery, the International Monetary Fund (IMF, 2022) projected that global GDP growth would remain uneven post-pandemic, reflecting deepening disparities. Developing countries, particularly in regions like sub-Saharan Africa, faced slower recovery rates than their advanced counterparts, leading to concerns that the gap between rich and poor nations would only widen (IMF, 2023). The failure to achieve equitable recovery exacerbates social tensions and threatens political stability, as populations become increasingly frustrated with unfulfilled economic promises and persistent poverty. Trade policies further contribute to ongoing global inequalities, as developing nations often find themselves marginalized within the international trading system (Bloor, 2022). The principle of reciprocity, while designed to create fairness, has frequently translated into imbalanced negotiations, where wealthier

countries impose stringent conditions on developing nations, demanding lower tariffs without offering equivalent concessions (Oxfam, 2020; UNCTAD, 2021). For example, agricultural sectors in developing countries often suffer from high tariffs placed on their exports to developed nations, while these same nations maintain subsidies for their own farmers, perpetuating cycles of inequity (World Bank, 2022). Additionally, climate change has emerged as a significant factor exacerbating global inequalities (ADESHINA and NDUKWE, 2024). Developing nations, despite contributing the least to global emissions, are often the most affected by climate-related events, such as floods and droughts. This reality highlights the injustice of climate change impacts, whereby countries that have historically contributed little to greenhouse gas emissions are disproportionately burdened (IPCC, 2022). The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP, 2023) emphasizes that addressing climate change requires not only a commitment to mitigation but also financial support for adaptation in vulnerable regions. However, the current mechanisms for climate financing are often insufficient, resulting in unmet needs for developing

countries that struggle to implement necessary changes (Lee, 2022). The intersectionality of these issues points to the urgent need for a rethinking of global governance systems that perpetuate inequalities. As highlighted by scholars and practitioners alike, a more equitable global trading framework must be established that accounts for the unique challenges faced by developing nations (Oxfam, 2020; UNCTAD, 2021). This includes advocating for fair trade practices that support economic development and environmental sustainability. In summary, the period between 2020 and 2023, researches has revealed the persistently deep-rooted inequalities confronting global equity. The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted disparities in health access, economic resilience, and trade practices, underscoring the urgent need for frameworks that prioritize fairness and equity (Giesen & Malang, 2022; Ogundipe *et al.*, 2023). Addressing these ongoing inequalities will require concerted international efforts that recognize the complexities of economies, social structures, and the environment, ensuring that all nations can participate meaningfully in global economic recovery and development.

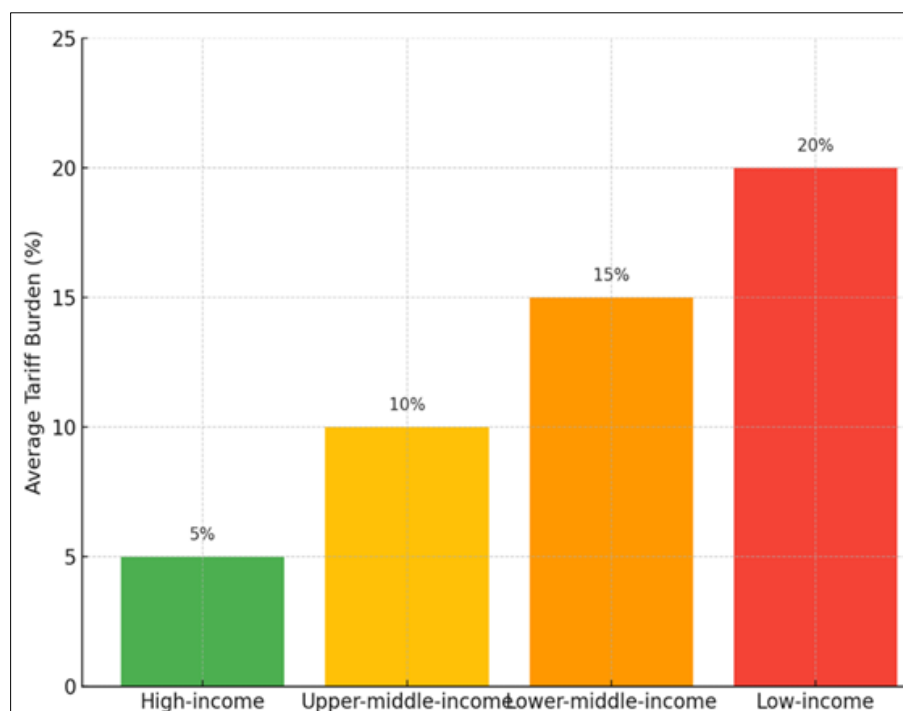


Fig 2: Global Trade Equity and Tariff Burden Distribution (Hancevic *et al.*, 2022)

2.6 Trade as a Tool for Peace building

Despite its risks, trade can also serve as a powerful instrument for peace. Regional trade agreements such as the European Union and ASEAN have demonstrated the peace-promoting effects of deep economic integration. When states are economically interdependent, the costs of conflict rise significantly, incentivizing diplomacy and collaboration (Weiss, 2022). Trade has historically been seen as a powerful instrument for promoting peace and fostering international cooperation. In the intricate interplay of global politics, economic exchanges can mitigate conflict, build trust, and serve as a foundation for diplomatic engagements. This section explores how trade functions as a tool for peacebuilding in the context of tariff regimes and reciprocity between 2020 and 2025, highlighting case studies and theoretical insights from recent literature. One of the most

established arguments in peace studies is that economic interdependence reduces the likelihood of conflict between nations. When countries are economically tied through trade, the costs of war become prohibitively high, making conflict less attractive (Rosato & Wolford, 2020). This idea is particularly relevant in the post-COVID-19 landscape, where nations increasingly recognize the value of mutual cooperation to ensure economic recovery. For instance, Gupta and Raghavan (2023) illustrate how Southeast Asian countries have utilized trade agreements to foster regional stability in the face of geopolitical tensions. The Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), signed in November 2020, has been pivotal in aligning the economic interests of member nations, including China, Japan, and Australia. By creating a vast trading bloc, these countries not only reduce tariffs but also establish a framework for

diplomatic engagement, enhancing regional peace and security (Cooray & Palanivel, 2022).

Trade agreements often serve as platforms for broader diplomatic dialogues (Ogundipe *et al.*, 2019; Olisa, 2025). Historical and contemporary examples validate the notion that trade creates avenues for countries to engage constructively, facilitating negotiations in other areas such as security and environmental concerns. Notably, the Abraham Accords, signed in 2020, exemplify this approach. Normalizing relations between Israel and several Arab nations, economic collaboration has been a focal point in building diplomatic ties. As noted by Abu Jaber (2021), the subsequent increase in trade between Israel, the UAE, and Bahrain has fostered a more stable regional environment, promoting cooperation on various fronts. These arrangements signal that economic interests can pave the way for peace, even in traditionally contentious areas.

2.7 Likely Implications on Global and National Trade Balance.

The combination of differing tariff regimes and reciprocal actions leads to a complex web of trade relationships that ultimately affects the global trade balance (Halliday, 2021). As countries attempt to protect domestic industries through tariffs, overall global trade volume may decline, impacting macroeconomic stability. The International Monetary Fund (2023) notes that broader protective measures implemented worldwide could adversely impact global GDP growth, leading to an overall contraction in international trade (Cheng, 2022). This shift results not only in immediate economic ramifications for specific countries but also in limited global market access for various products and services, further destabilizing trade balances. The potential for a prolonged "trade recession" could arise if nations persist

in viewing trade through a lens of competition rather than collaboration (Ferguson, 2022). On a national level, the implications of tariff regimes on trade balances can create precarious economic conditions. Initially, tariffs may protect domestic industries, encouraging local production and potentially improving the trade balance. However, the longer-term consequences can reverse these gains as industries become less competitive globally. A study by Lopez and Lane (2023) found that in the United States, while certain sectors benefitted in the short run from protectionist policies, broader consumer price increases and disruptions in supply chains contributed to growing trade deficits over time.

In the same vein, developing nations often find themselves at a disadvantage when major economies institute tariffs, potentially experiencing larger trade imbalances as their exports face higher barriers while imports from major economies remain tariff-free or exempt (Asonze *et al.*, 2024). The resulting disparities can exacerbate existing inequalities and negatively affect economic growth in those nations (World Bank, 2022). In summary, the implications of tariff regimes and reciprocity significantly shape both global peace and the trade balance of nations. While the immediate intention of tariffs may be to correct trade imbalances or protect domestic industries, the broader consequences often lead to unintended disruptions in global trade flows, potentially escalating tensions between nations (Ejibenam *et al.*, 2021; Narlikar, 2022). The complex relationship between tariff policies and trade balances requires careful navigation by policymakers, particularly in a post-pandemic world where the interconnectedness of economies is more pronounced than ever. Pursuing collaborative trade agreements while minimizing protectionist measures may prove essential in fostering economic stability and maintaining peace (Rogan, 2022).

Table 3: Trade Balance Before and After Major Trade Agreements

Country/Bloc	Before Agreement (\$B)	After Agreement (\$B)	Net Change
Nigeria (AfCFTA)	-5.2	-2.1	+3.1
UK (Post-Brexit)	+1.8	-4.5	-6.3
Vietnam (CPTPP)	+2.4	+6.7	+4.3

3. Conclusion

The years from 2020 to 2023 have marked a significant turning point in the realm of international trade, highlighting the complexities and disparities inherent in the global economy. The COVID-19 pandemic was a pivotal event that not only exposed existing inequalities but also introduced new challenges that require urgent attention. As nations struggled to navigate the aftermath of the pandemic, the shortcomings of current global systems, especially in terms of health equity and economic resilience, became increasingly evident. This period has made it clear that reforms are necessary to ensure a more equitable growth trajectory that benefits all nations, particularly those most vulnerable. The principle of reciprocity in trade agreements, which is intended to foster fair international relations, has often led to unequal outcomes. Developing countries frequently find themselves at a negotiating disadvantage, forced to concede terms that do not align with their economic realities. This imbalance has profound implications, as restrictive trade practices and tariff barriers limit their ability to compete in the global market, perpetuating cycles of poverty and hindering development. The need for a

comprehensive reevaluation of trade frameworks is critical, ensuring they are structured to promote inclusivity and equity among diverse economies.

Furthermore, the climate crisis has emerged as a pressing factor compounding these inequalities. Developing nations, which contribute the least to global emissions, often bear the brunt of climate impacts, facing severe consequences such as natural disasters and resource scarcity. The lack of adequate financial support and technological assistance hampers their ability to respond effectively to such challenges. Addressing climate change must be a collaborative effort that recognizes the disproportionate burdens carried by these countries if we are to achieve sustainable global development. As the world moves forward, the emphasis must shift toward collaborative solutions that promote mutual benefit. The experiences gained during the pandemic and the ongoing economic shifts present a valuable opportunity to encourage cooperative engagement. Policymakers are challenged to capitalize on this moment by crafting trade agreements that consider national capacities and promote fairness.

In essence, the journey toward global equity is fraught with obstacles, but it is not insurmountable. By dismantling

systemic barriers that limit participation, fostering inclusive trade practices, and addressing social and environmental needs, a just and sustainable future can be realized. This ongoing commitment to equity, cooperation, and reform is essential for creating a world where all nations can thrive and contribute meaningfully to the global economy. As the international community grapples with these complex issues, it is crucial to focus on pathways that lead to shared prosperity and resilience, ensuring that the lessons learned from these tumultuous years guide future actions.

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