



The Quiet Disruption: Trade, Multilateralism, and the Reconfiguration of Global Cooperation

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A new phase in global economic relations is unfolding—one marked not by the sharp ruptures of war or recession but by a steady erosion of the principles that have long underpinned the multilateral system. Nowhere is this shift more visible than in the domain of trade. Recent actions by the new U.S. administration—particularly the introduction of sweeping tariffs framed as “reciprocal”—have accelerated a trend that predates them: the weakening of consensus-based global governance and the return of economic self-interest as the dominant force shaping trade relations.

While appealing in the abstract, the language of reciprocity masks a more profound imbalance. When applied to countries at vastly different levels of development, such a principle can become punitive rather than corrective. The consequences are particularly stark for African economies that have historically been marginal players in global trade. Many of these nations are only beginning to integrate into global value chains, often encouraged to do so by the very rules and institutions now being cast aside. They now find themselves exposed to a less predictable, less rules-bound landscape and less accommodating of their developmental realities.

The new tariffs introduced by the United States, though ostensibly targeted at significant trading partners, have had collateral impacts on African exporters. Countries like Madagascar, Lesotho, and Kenya—previously hailed for their compliance with trade norms and their effective use of mechanisms like the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA)—are seeing their access to markets increasingly restricted. In some cases, emerging manufacturing sectors have been dealt severe blows just as they became competitive. This is not just an

economic issue but a matter of trust in the viability of long-term engagement with global trade systems.

This shift, however, did not begin with the current administration. As I have argued in earlier writings, the foundations of the multilateral trade order have been gradually weakening for over two decades. The slow recovery from the global financial crisis, growing inequality, the inability of institutions like the World Trade Organization to transform their mandates, and rising geopolitical competition all contributed to a gradual loss of faith in multilateralism. The COVID-19 pandemic laid bare the stark inequalities in global access to vaccines, medical supplies, and fiscal space—exposing how value creation and crisis response remain deeply skewed in favour of those already commanding the upper tiers of global production and finance.

What is new is the openness with which major actors are now pursuing unilateral or selective engagement strategies, including the ones in the name of climate action. The preference for bilateral deals, “friend-shoring,” and the construction of exclusive trading blocs indicate a broader transformation: from a global trading system based on shared norms to a fragmented one governed by power dynamics.

This evolution poses a dual challenge. On the one hand, the decline of traditional trade preferences and multilateral safeguards means we can no longer rely on the mechanisms that previously framed developing countries' progressive integration into the global economy. Conversely, the emerging vacuum offers a rare opportunity to rethink policies and approaches, pivot toward more strategic partnerships, and assert a more autonomous role in shaping the economic future.

We are already witnessing a significant pivot in global trade dynamics. Without predictable Western engagement, many African countries actively diversify their economic partnerships. The Gulf states have become increasingly prominent, particularly in infrastructure, logistics, and energy markets. But it is impossible to overlook China and India's enduring and growing influence. China remains Africa's largest bilateral trading partner, with trade reaching over \$282 billion in 2023. India has also deepened its footprint through investments in pharmaceuticals, digital technology, and energy, making it the continent's third-largest trading partner.



Beyond Africa, Asia has broadly consolidated its role as the epicentre of global trade. Between 2017 and 2023, ASEAN countries posted average annual trade growth of around 6%, with India and Vietnam exceeding 7% and 8%, respectively—well above the global average of 5%. In Latin America, trade with China rose to \$489 billion in 2023, including \$243 billion in Chinese imports from the region, a 4.9% increase from the previous year. Globally, South-South trade surged from \$600 billion in 1995 to over \$5.3 trillion by 2021, now surpassing North-South trade flows.

These shifts reflect the emergence of a multipolar trade environment—one in which emerging economies increasingly assert influence and set the terms of engagement.

Yet diversification alone is not enough. To truly navigate the post-consensus era of global trade, countries must invest in building regional resilience. The African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) represents a critical step. More than a trade agreement, it is a platform for reimagining Africa's place in global production networks—enabling value addition, reducing intra-continental transaction costs, and creating a large, unified market that can negotiate with greater confidence on the international stage.

However, even the AfCFTA cannot be insulated from the dynamics of reshaping global trade. New layers of complexity are emerging from the EU's Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism to the reconfiguration of digital trade norms and the rise of strategic export controls. These developments require African countries to react and participate proactively in global norm-setting. That means bolstering analytical capacity, strengthening regulatory institutions, and fostering a new generation of trade negotiators who understand the intricacies of today's political economy.

Equally important is the need to reframe the conversation around development financing. The erosion of traditional aid flows and development cooperation frameworks must not be seen simply as a loss but as a catalyst to rethink countries' positioning. This includes advocating for reforms to global financial institutions, pushing back against biased credit ratings, and exploring innovative mechanisms such as blended finance, regional development funds, and climate-linked investments.



Ultimately, the changes we are witnessing in global trade governance are part of a broader reordering of international relations. The consensus era that followed the Second World War—with its norms of multilateralism, non-discrimination, and special treatment for developing countries—gives way to a world shaped by contestation, fragmentation, and strategic rivalry. For some, this is cause for alarm. But for many in the Global South, it may also mark a moment of awakening.

We may no longer live in a world where shared norms govern economic interactions. But that does not mean marginalisation must be accepted. It compels emerging and developing economies to articulate a new vision for their place in global trade based not on preference, but on performance, not charity, but strategy.

