

DECOLONIZING TRADE RELATIONS: THE US TARIFF REGIME AND POSTCOLONIAL ECONOMIC RESISTANCE

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rosianalestari@gmail.com**Abstract**

This paper investigates how the United States' tariff regime continues to reflect structural features of colonial power in global economic relations. While often justified through narratives of national security, competitiveness, or trade fairness, contemporary U.S. tariff policies disproportionately target countries in the Global South, revealing an enduring pattern of economic coercion. By employing a postcolonial framework, the study argues that tariffs are not only tools of economic management but also instruments of strategic discipline that maintain asymmetric trade relations. The analysis draws on three case studies (India, Brazil, and South Africa) to show how these states have responded to U.S. trade pressures through a combination of legal contestation at multilateral forums, institutional innovation, and regional cooperation. These responses are interpreted not as isolated trade maneuvers, but as forms of postcolonial resistance that challenge the legitimacy of Western-dominated trade rules. Initiatives such as BRICS, the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), and efforts toward de-dollarization are examined as expressions of trade sovereignty and epistemic realignment. The paper further explores how dominant economic theories and institutions reproduce the epistemic authority of the Global North while delegitimizing alternative models of development. In response, the article introduces the concept of a decolonial trade ethic, which emphasizes mutuality, historical accountability, and epistemic plurality in shaping future trade relations. This approach calls for a reconfiguration of global commerce that moves beyond extractive logics and toward a more just and inclusive economic order grounded in the values and agency of postcolonial states.

Keyword

postcolonial trade, tariff regimes, global south, economic sovereignty, decolonial political economy

A. Introduction

In recent years, global attention has increasingly turned toward the resurgence of tariff-based economic policies, particularly those enacted by the United

States (Ju et al., 2024). Far from functioning merely as instruments of economic protection, these tariffs embody deeper asymmetries in global trade, reactivating historical patterns of domination and dependence. The trade war initiated by the U.S. under the Trump administration and strategically continued by the Biden administration is not an isolated economic episode but rather a continuation of an enduring global hierarchy (Niu, 2023). These measures, often justified under the pretense of protecting domestic industries or safeguarding intellectual property, reflect a broader logic of geopolitical control embedded in economic tools. This emerging reality compels scholars to move beyond economic rationalism and interrogate the colonial legacies still embedded within trade regimes. Within this context, it becomes necessary to rethink trade as a domain structured by historical power relations rather than as a neutral mechanism of global commerce (Zeng et al., 2022).

The U.S. has increasingly directed its tariff measures toward countries in the Global South, leveraging trade as a tool of strategic negotiation and coercion. India, Brazil, South Africa, and several Southeast Asian nations have faced punitive tariffs or the threat thereof, often as retaliation for refusing to align with U.S. commercial interests. According to data from the World Bank and the Office of the United States Trade Representative, more than 40 percent of new U.S. tariffs imposed between 2018 and 2023 disproportionately affected developing economies (W. Li et al., 2023). While mainstream analysis tends to interpret these actions through the lens of trade deficits or geopolitical balancing, such readings overlook the persistence of historical imbalances in the global economic system. Existing literature remains dominated by neoliberal and institutionalist frameworks, largely neglecting the asymmetrical power embedded in the architecture of global trade. This lacuna reveals the urgent need for alternative perspectives capable of addressing the structural dimensions of global economic inequality (Sha & Zhao, 2024).

The central problem this paper seeks to address is the inability of current trade discourses to account for the historical and postcolonial dimensions of global tariff politics. Most policy discussions reduce tariffs to technical or short-term protectionist measures, ignoring the ways in which they perpetuate unequal access to global markets. By framing trade disputes within an economic logic, scholars and policymakers effectively obscure the political nature of global commerce. In this context, the issue is not merely one of efficiency or comparative advantage, but of enduring structural violence encoded into the very mechanisms of trade governance. The use of tariffs by the United States—especially against nations that were once colonized or remain economically peripheral—should thus be examined not only as economic strategy but also as a continuation of imperial forms of control (Wambrauw & Menufandu, 2022).

The literature on international political economy has long focused on the material aspects of trade flows and tariff policies, yet it has failed to engage meaningfully with postcolonial theory (Hosain Sajjad & Hossain Saddam,

2019). While dependency theory and world-systems analysis offered early critiques of global inequality, these approaches have often been sidelined in contemporary trade debates. Postcolonial perspectives, which emphasize the epistemic and symbolic dimensions of global hierarchies, are rarely mobilized in discussions of trade regimes or tariff structures. This reveals a significant research gap. The intellectual tools needed to analyze the unequal terrain of global commerce already exist within postcolonial studies, yet they remain disconnected from mainstream trade discourse. This separation has impeded a more holistic understanding of how tariff policies serve to reproduce hierarchies of power and dependence (Stawasz-Grabowska & Wieloch, 2023).

Furthermore, most empirical studies on U.S. tariff regimes tend to prioritize large economies such as China or the European Union, thereby neglecting the unique vulnerabilities and resistances emerging from the Global South. While some scholarship addresses retaliatory measures or trade realignments, there remains limited exploration of how Global South nations deploy strategic resistance against U.S. economic coercion. For instance, India's appeal to the WTO against discriminatory U.S. tariffs, or Brazil's pivot toward BRICS-centered trade networks, exemplify efforts to assert economic agency within a hostile trade environment. However, these actions are seldom theorized as forms of postcolonial resistance. There is thus a compelling need to analyze not only the impact of U.S. tariffs on the Global South, but also the diverse strategies of contestation and realignment that these nations undertake in response (Liu et al., 2022).

A growing body of evidence suggests that Global South nations are increasingly developing counter-narratives and alternative economic practices in response to U.S. tariff aggression. These include South-South cooperation, currency swaps to bypass the U.S. dollar, and institutional innovations such as the New Development Bank under BRICS. While these strategies are often interpreted as pragmatic or regional adaptations, they may also be read as gestures of epistemic and economic resistance. By asserting autonomy from U.S.-dominated trade structures, these nations are engaging in a form of decolonial praxis. This shift invites scholars to rethink economic policy not merely as technical administration but as a field of ideological and political struggle, where knowledge production and sovereignty are closely intertwined (Cui & Li, 2021).

This study thus seeks to critically interrogate the structure of the U.S. tariff regime through the lens of postcolonial theory. It aims to understand how tariff mechanisms, far from being neutral economic instruments, operate as tools of governance and hierarchy in the global order. At the same time, the study explores the various forms of resistance articulated by Global South nations as they navigate, contest, and reconfigure their trade relationships. Drawing on case studies from India, Brazil, and South Africa, the paper investigates how these states mobilize historical consciousness, institutional alternatives, and discursive strategies to challenge the status quo. This

methodological orientation allows for a more complex understanding of trade politics, one that centers history, identity, and power (Lin, 2023).

The urgency of this research lies in the accelerating fragmentation of the global trade order. As multilateral institutions such as the WTO struggle to maintain legitimacy and enforce rules equitably, unilateral actions by powerful states threaten to undermine global economic stability. In this moment of transition, the Global South faces both heightened vulnerability and unprecedented opportunity. Whether through new regional alignments, legal contests at global forums, or the articulation of alternative economic imaginaries, these states are not merely reacting but actively shaping the future of international trade. A postcolonial lens helps to illuminate the stakes of this transformation by emphasizing the historical continuities and ruptures at play (Carvalho et al., 2019).

This paper therefore argues that decolonizing trade requires more than technical reforms or institutional adjustments. It necessitates a fundamental rethinking of how trade is conceptualized, governed, and contested. By situating the U.S. tariff regime within a broader matrix of colonial continuity, and by foregrounding the agency of Global South nations, this study challenges the dominant paradigms of trade analysis. It seeks to contribute to an emerging field of scholarship that combines political economy with postcolonial critique, thus opening new avenues for research and policy.

The aim of this paper is to offer a postcolonial reading of the U.S. tariff regime and the forms of resistance it has provoked across the Global South. In doing so, it contributes to the growing literature on the politics of trade, power, and inequality. The paper is structured into six sections. The first explores the colonial continuities in contemporary trade regimes. The second examines the political economy of U.S. tariff practices. The third analyzes the strategic resistances of Global South nations. The fourth turns to the epistemic reconfigurations of global trade discourse. The fifth investigates the role of emerging alliances such as BRICS, while the final section considers the ethical and conceptual foundations for decolonizing global trade.

B. Colonial Continuities in Contemporary Trade Regimes

The concept of deterrence, as developed during the early stages of the Cold War, was primarily designed to rationalize and manage the strategic relationship between the United States and the Soviet Union under the shadow of nuclear annihilation. At its essence, deterrence rests on a simple but powerful premise: adversaries can be dissuaded from initiating conflict if the expected costs of aggression clearly outweigh any potential benefits. This logic presupposes the existence of rational actors who are capable of calculating strategic risks and rewards based on the credible threat of retaliation. The presence of nuclear weapons, particularly those with assured second-strike capabilities, is thought to raise the stakes of conflict to such an extent that both parties would be compelled to avoid escalation. This model has served as the

cornerstone of strategic thought in international relations, and has been widely adopted in other geopolitical contexts, including the South Asian subcontinent, where India and Pakistan have developed and maintained nuclear capabilities since the late 1990s (Tarapore, 2023).

The contemporary global trade system is often presented as a space governed by rules, neutrality, and rational economic behavior. However, such representations conceal the extent to which global trade retains the structural logic of colonial domination. Although formal colonialism has ended, its economic infrastructures remain embedded in international institutions, tariff regimes, and normative frameworks. The World Trade Organization, while claiming to uphold fairness and equal opportunity, continues to reproduce patterns that disproportionately benefit industrialized nations. The legacy of colonial extraction is perpetuated through the architecture of trade agreements, tariff classifications, and access to dispute resolution mechanisms, all of which reflect the asymmetries established during the colonial period (Boylan et al., 2021).

Colonial powers historically used tariffs to protect their domestic industries while simultaneously forcing open markets in the colonies. Britain's aggressive imposition of free trade in India, for example, decimated local industries while shielding British manufacturers from competition. This dual system of protection at home and liberalization abroad laid the groundwork for a global trade order rooted in inequality. The United States, although not a colonial empire in the classical European sense, inherited and refined this dual logic, using tariffs and trade policy to project power while demanding compliance from economically subordinate states. The continuity between these historical practices and present-day trade regimes underscores the need for critical analysis that links past and present (Wang et al., 2021).

The US tariff regime has evolved as a mechanism of both economic self-interest and geopolitical strategy. During the Cold War, trade preferences were selectively offered to allies, while adversaries were excluded or punished through tariff barriers. In the post-Cold War era, the rhetoric shifted to market efficiency and global integration, but the underlying practices of control remained intact. Today, unilateral tariffs are once again employed not only against strategic rivals such as China, but also against Global South nations that pursue independent economic policies. This selective targeting demonstrates how trade policy operates as a tool for enforcing conformity within a global system whose foundations remain deeply hierarchical (P. Fajgelbaum et al., 2021).

The language of "free trade" functions as a rhetorical veil that obscures the unequal realities of global commerce. While developed nations advocate for open markets, they simultaneously maintain complex tariff structures and non-tariff barriers that restrict access for goods from the Global South. Agricultural subsidies in the United States and the European Union, for instance, depress global prices and undermine producers in Africa and Latin

America. These practices not only contravene the principles of fair competition but also mirror colonial-era systems of unequal exchange. By controlling both the rules and the language of trade, powerful nations continue to shape global markets in ways that reflect and reinforce historical power asymmetries (P. D. Fajgelbaum & Khandelwal, 2022).

Postcolonial theorists such as Frantz Fanon and Walter Mignolo have emphasized the persistence of coloniality in structures that outlive colonial administrations. This concept is highly applicable to trade regimes, where the legacies of coercion, dependency, and racialized hierarchy remain active. Tariffs function as part of a larger geopolitical apparatus that disciplines states and determines their position within the international division of labor. From the perspective of the Global South, participation in global trade is not simply a matter of policy choice but often a constrained necessity shaped by the weight of historical marginalization. Recognition of this coloniality is essential to any serious effort to decolonize trade (Bown, 2025).

One illustrative example of this continuity is the treatment of African textile industries under U.S. trade preferences. Programs such as the African Growth and Opportunity Act (AGOA) are often framed as generous initiatives designed to promote African exports. Yet, in practice, they are laden with conditionalities that limit the autonomy of African producers. Local industries must comply with U.S. labor, environmental, and political standards, while their market access remains precarious and revocable. This dynamic reproduces a colonial logic of conditional inclusion, where participation is contingent upon conformity to the standards of the hegemon (Lake & Nie, 2023).

Moreover, the classification of goods under international tariff schedules is itself a terrain of power. The Harmonized System, administered by the World Customs Organization, determines how products are labeled and taxed. However, developing countries have limited influence in shaping these classifications. The result is a system in which high-value-added goods from the Global North are taxed minimally, while primary commodities and manufactured goods from the Global South often face higher duties. This differential treatment is not accidental but reflects a historical system in which the economic identity of the South is fixed as a supplier of raw materials, reinforcing its subordinate status in the global economy (Benguria et al., 2022).

In addition to structural mechanisms, colonial continuities are also evident in the epistemological foundations of trade knowledge. The dominant theories used in trade policy—neoclassical economics, comparative advantage, and Ricardian models—are rooted in European intellectual traditions that emerged alongside colonial expansion. These theories were developed to justify and manage the global flows of goods, capital, and labor that colonialism made possible. By privileging these frameworks, contemporary trade analysis excludes alternative knowledge systems and economic logics that have emerged from the Global South. This epistemic

exclusion constitutes a form of intellectual colonialism that continues to shape how trade is studied and governed (C. Li et al., 2018).

The persistence of colonial patterns in contemporary trade regimes challenges the notion that globalization represents a break from the past. Instead, it reveals a long durée of economic control, mediated through evolving institutions and justified by shifting discourses. Tariffs are not merely relics of mercantilism but are actively reconfigured to serve the interests of powerful states under new names and narratives. Whether framed as sanctions, safeguards, or national security measures, these instruments continue to mark the boundary between inclusion and exclusion in the world economy. They determine whose industries are protected, whose development is allowed, and whose sovereignty is respected (Žemaitytė & Urbšienė, 2020).

Understanding the colonial continuities in trade policy is not simply a matter of historical critique but a prerequisite for transformative politics. Without this recognition, efforts at reform risk replicating the very structures they seek to dismantle. By illuminating the colonial foundations of contemporary tariff regimes, scholars and policymakers can begin to imagine alternative futures in which trade is grounded in principles of equity, autonomy, and mutual respect. This requires not only new institutions but also a shift in the intellectual paradigms that inform global economic governance (Wu et al., 2021).

C. Political Economy of US Tariff Regimes

The evolution of the United States' tariff policy reflects a deep entanglement between economic interests and geopolitical imperatives. Tariffs are not simply fiscal tools but mechanisms of strategic influence that operate within a broader matrix of global power. Historically, U.S. protectionism has been driven by the dual objectives of domestic industrial development and the projection of American economic leadership. From the early Hamiltonian system to the Smoot-Hawley Tariff Act of 1930, tariffs have played a central role in shaping the political economy of the United States. In the contemporary era, especially since 2016, these policies have been reinvigorated under nationalist slogans such as "America First," signaling a return to unilateralism that disregards multilateral trade norms (Chor & Li, 2021).

The administration of President Donald Trump marked a decisive shift in U.S. trade policy, with tariffs deployed not only against China but also against longstanding allies and Global South nations. Under Section 301 of the Trade Act and Section 232 of the Trade Expansion Act, the U.S. imposed sweeping tariffs on steel, aluminum, and a range of manufactured goods, often citing threats to national security. While these justifications received legal scrutiny, their practical effect was to create a climate of uncertainty and dependence among targeted nations. Countries such as India and Turkey faced abrupt tariff escalations, which disrupted export flows and strained

bilateral relations. The apparent arbitrariness of these actions reveals how the U.S. tariff regime functions as a coercive apparatus, capable of disciplining states that deviate from its economic or geopolitical expectations (Kim & Margalit, 2021).

Although the Biden administration has adopted a more diplomatic tone, its approach to tariffs has remained substantively continuous. While seeking to repair relationships strained under Trump, Biden has maintained key tariffs on China and shown limited willingness to fully re-engage in multilateral trade liberalization. In fact, the emphasis on “reshoring” supply chains and promoting domestic manufacturing echoes earlier protectionist impulses, albeit with a progressive veneer. This bipartisan consensus around economic nationalism suggests that the U.S. tariff regime is less about individual administrations than it is about structural interests embedded within the American political economy. Tariffs thus serve as instruments not only of economic correction but also of national identity and ideological assertion (Zhang et al., 2023).

The economic rationale behind U.S. tariff measures is often framed as a response to unfair trade practices, trade imbalances, or threats to domestic employment. However, these narratives obscure the selective and often inconsistent application of tariff policy. For example, while the U.S. targets China for alleged intellectual property violations, it offers exemptions to countries with comparable practices if they serve broader strategic objectives. This inconsistency indicates that the application of tariffs is not governed by universal standards but by shifting political calculations. The political economy of U.S. tariffs is therefore rooted in the desire to preserve its hegemonic position in the global economic hierarchy while managing domestic pressures from industries and labor constituencies (Thalpawila, 2022).

In many cases, the imposition of tariffs on Global South countries is linked less to concerns over trade fairness and more to geopolitical leverage. Tariffs become a form of economic statecraft, deployed to compel alignment with U.S. policy preferences in areas ranging from defense cooperation to digital governance. For instance, the imposition of higher tariffs on Indian aluminum exports in 2018 coincided with India’s growing defense ties with Russia and its resistance to U.S. positions on data localization. Similarly, the suspension of trade preferences under the Generalized System of Preferences (GSP) often coincides with disagreements over intellectual property or labor rights, issues that serve as pretexts for exerting pressure. These linkages illustrate the instrumentalization of trade to secure broader strategic outcomes (Yaseen et al., 2016).

Beyond bilateral relationships, the U.S. tariff regime plays a significant role in shaping global trade norms and institutions. By asserting its right to impose unilateral tariffs outside WTO dispute mechanisms, the U.S. undermines the legitimacy of the multilateral trading system. This creates a

paradox where the dominant power simultaneously claims to uphold rules-based trade while violating its core tenets. The result is a destabilized global trade order in which smaller and developing nations are left vulnerable to arbitrary economic disruptions. The erosion of multilateralism, driven in part by U.S. tariff policy, has forced many countries to reevaluate their participation in the current system and consider regional or alternative frameworks (Qayyum et al., 2021).

The discourse of national security as a justification for tariff measures has become a powerful tool for circumventing global accountability. By invoking security threats, the U.S. has crafted an exception clause that is immune to traditional legal or economic critique (Yaseen et al., 2016). This framing enables the expansion of executive authority and provides ideological cover for what are, in essence, economic interventions. The broadening of what constitutes a “security interest” reflects the securitization of trade policy, in which economic interactions are reframed as threats requiring decisive, often unilateral, state responses. This development has profound implications for international economic relations, as it further normalizes the use of coercive measures in place of cooperative governance.

The domestic political economy of the U.S. also contributes significantly to the persistence of the tariff regime. Powerful lobbies representing agriculture, steel, pharmaceuticals, and technology actively shape trade policy to protect their interests. These constituencies benefit from targeted tariffs and subsidies, creating a cycle of protection and rent-seeking that distorts global markets (Niu, 2023). Moreover, political elites across party lines find in tariffs a populist tool to appeal to disaffected workers and industrial regions suffering from deindustrialization. This convergence of corporate lobbying and populist nationalism ensures that tariffs remain embedded within the institutional architecture of U.S. economic governance.

The racialized dimension of U.S. tariff policy is another important, albeit less visible, aspect of its political economy. The differential treatment of countries in the Global South, as opposed to Euro-American allies, reveals a hierarchy of respect and inclusion within U.S. trade diplomacy. Nations with colonial histories or predominantly non-white populations are more frequently subjected to scrutiny, conditionalities, and punitive measures. This pattern reflects broader cultural assumptions about the legitimacy, reliability, and capacity of Global South states to participate in global markets. Understanding tariffs as part of a racialized global order opens new avenues for critique and resistance, aligning trade analysis with broader struggles for justice and equality (Niu, 2023).

The U.S. tariff regime thus operates at the intersection of economics, politics, and ideology. It is not a neutral tool but a strategic device shaped by domestic pressures, global ambitions, and historical legacies. The selective application of tariffs, the erosion of multilateral norms, and the racialized underpinnings of trade enforcement all point to a system in which economic

policy serves as a continuation of imperial logic by other means. Recognizing this dynamic is essential for developing effective strategies of resistance and for imagining alternative frameworks for global economic relations rooted in equity, reciprocity, and sovereignty.

D. Postcolonial Resistance in Trade Diplomacy

In the face of an increasingly coercive global trade regime led by the United States, countries in the Global South have begun to develop varied forms of diplomatic resistance(Gray & Potter, 2020). This resistance is not limited to reactive retaliation or complaints within existing multilateral forums. Rather, it includes a broader spectrum of strategic, discursive, and institutional responses that challenge the underlying premises of the current trade order. Unlike earlier periods where resistance often took the form of nationalist protectionism, today's efforts are deeply embedded in a postcolonial awareness of global power structures. These strategies reflect a conscious effort to reclaim agency, disrupt dependency, and reconstruct trade diplomacy on more equitable foundations(Moenardy & Sinaga, 2021).

One prominent arena of resistance is the World Trade Organization (WTO), where Global South nations have increasingly coordinated to challenge tariff measures that disproportionately affect them. India and South Africa, for instance, have taken leading roles in contesting U.S. policies on agricultural subsidies, pharmaceutical patents, and digital trade. These countries have not only objected to specific tariff implementations but have also questioned the ideological assumptions embedded within WTO jurisprudence. Their joint proposal during the COVID-19 pandemic to waive intellectual property rights for vaccines demonstrated a form of diplomatic resistance rooted in postcolonial solidarity. This move was not merely about access to medicine but also about reframing the global trade narrative to include equity and historical justice (Hosain Sajjad & Hossain Saddam, 2019).

Beyond legalistic approaches, many Global South states have begun to restructure their trade priorities through regional cooperation and alternative alliances. Initiatives such as the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), and the Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America (ALBA) represent efforts to insulate trade flows from the volatility of U.S.-dominated regimes. These frameworks often emphasize mutual development, policy autonomy, and historical solidarity over pure market liberalism. While not free from internal contradictions, they offer spaces where trade can be decoupled from the hierarchical relations that define the global system. In this context, postcolonial resistance takes the form of architectural innovation, where institutions themselves are reimagined (Liu et al., 2022).

Another critical form of resistance lies in discursive and symbolic politics. Postcolonial states increasingly mobilize narratives of economic justice, historical exploitation, and sovereignty to reframe trade disputes in

moral and political terms. For example, Brazilian and Indian diplomats have invoked colonial legacies in speeches before the WTO and UNCTAD, highlighting how past exploitation continues to shape present inequalities. These rhetorical strategies challenge the technical neutrality of trade discourse, exposing it as a terrain shaped by unequal histories. By centering terms such as “economic decolonization” or “sovereign development,” Global South countries seek to shift the normative framework of international trade away from abstract efficiency toward moral accountability (Killian, 2021).

Currency diplomacy has also emerged as a powerful tool of resistance. By conducting bilateral trade in national currencies or regional alternatives, countries such as Russia, India, Brazil, and China have sought to reduce their dependence on the U.S. dollar. While often viewed through a geopolitical lens, this monetary strategy is also an epistemic break from the financial order established under U.S. hegemony. It challenges not only the material centrality of the dollar but also the intellectual architecture of global finance, which assumes the natural superiority of Western monetary institutions. By rejecting this premise, these countries advance a subtle but profound critique of the coloniality embedded in international monetary systems (Tobing & Virgianita, 2020).

Legal resistance at the international level has been accompanied by domestic reforms aimed at insulating economies from the volatility of Western trade practices. India’s “Atmanirbhar Bharat” (self-reliant India) campaign is a prime example of how postcolonial states seek to rebalance their development trajectories without severing ties with global markets (Côté et al., 2020). This policy initiative integrates trade, industrial, and innovation policies to reduce reliance on imports, especially from countries exercising tariff pressure. While it has been criticized for its protectionist tendencies, its underlying ethos reflects a broader assertion of developmental sovereignty. It signifies a refusal to accept externally imposed models of competitiveness and trade liberalization that have historically served Western interests (Ju et al., 2024).

South-South diplomacy is another important vector of postcolonial resistance. Forums such as the Group of 77 (G77), the Non-Aligned Movement, and more recently, the BRICS coalition have facilitated the exchange of ideas, technical knowledge, and coordinated bargaining strategies among developing countries. These platforms operate not only as geopolitical counterweights but also as epistemic communities where shared histories of colonialism inform collective decision-making. In trade negotiations, this often translates into unified positions on tariff schedules, agricultural reform, and access to technology (Tobing & Virgianita, 2020). By fostering a sense of horizontal solidarity, these initiatives allow countries to resist the fragmenting pressures of bilateral deals imposed by dominant powers.

While many of these strategies are institutionally embedded, resistance also occurs through localized practices and policy innovations that deviate

from global trade norms. For example, Bolivia under Evo Morales restructured its trade relations to prioritize food sovereignty and indigenous economic models. These practices were not framed within WTO paradigms but drew from local knowledge systems and cultural histories often ignored in international forums. Such examples demonstrate how resistance can also take the form of epistemic pluralism—rejecting universal economic templates in favor of alternative modernities (Niu, 2023). Postcolonial resistance thus becomes an act of knowledge production as much as an act of negotiation or protest.

The success of postcolonial resistance does not lie solely in immediate policy outcomes but in the reconfiguration of what constitutes legitimate trade practice (Sha & Zhao, 2024). By asserting the validity of diverse economic models and challenging the universality of neoliberal assumptions, Global South countries reshape the field of global trade diplomacy. Resistance, in this sense, is not merely opposition but proposition. It is an effort to construct new normative horizons, new forms of economic life, and new institutions that reflect the histories and aspirations of postcolonial nations. This transformation, though uneven and contested, points to a broader shift in the moral geography of international trade.

Importantly, this resistance is not always cohesive or uniformly progressive. Competing interests, regional rivalries, and internal political pressures often limit the effectiveness of coordinated responses. Yet, these contradictions do not diminish the significance of the broader movement toward trade decolonization. Rather, they reflect the complex terrain of postcolonial agency—a space where sovereignty is negotiated, not assumed. Understanding this complexity is crucial for appreciating the innovations and limitations of resistance within a global system that continues to reproduce inequality through trade.

Postcolonial resistance in trade diplomacy involves a constellation of practices—legal, institutional, rhetorical, monetary, and epistemic—that seek to disrupt the structural advantages enjoyed by the Global North. By mobilizing historical memory, regional cooperation, and discursive power, Global South countries challenge the legitimacy of U.S.-led tariff regimes and propose alternative visions for global commerce. These efforts mark the emergence of a decolonial turn in trade politics, one that moves beyond complaint toward reimagination. It is within this emergent horizon that new possibilities for equitable and sovereign trade relations can be envisioned.

E. Epistemic Shifts in Global Trade Narratives

Taken together, these strategies do not constitute a final peace plan, but rather a roadmap for transforming the political and strategic conditions that currently prevent peace. They acknowledge the asymmetries of power, ideology, and institutional structure between the two states, while also recognizing the shared vulnerabilities that bind them. They avoid the false

promise of immediate resolution, instead focusing on achievable, incremental steps that can reverse the logic of confrontation and lay the groundwork for long-term transformation. In the following section, this paper will return to the broader argument about deterrence and militarized nationalism, reflecting on how these proposed pathways intersect with the challenges previously outlined and whether a recalibration of regional security thinking is indeed possible in the current historical moment (Lake & Nie, 2023).

Trade regimes are not only shaped by economic interests and legal frameworks, but also by the epistemologies that govern how trade is understood, justified, and institutionalized. The dominance of neoclassical economics, rational choice theory, and liberal institutionalism in trade discourse has constructed a particular vision of global commerce that privileges efficiency, liberalization, and technocratic neutrality. This vision is not ideologically neutral; rather, it reflects the intellectual heritage of Enlightenment rationality, European political economy, and American strategic interests. The result is a trade knowledge regime that appears objective but is in fact deeply ideological and exclusionary, particularly toward perspectives rooted in postcolonial experience (Benguria et al., 2022).

The foundational theories of trade—such as Adam Smith’s free market liberalism and David Ricardo’s doctrine of comparative advantage—were conceived within contexts of empire and colonial expansion. These theories justified and facilitated the integration of colonies into global economic circuits on terms favorable to imperial powers (Žemaitytė & Urbšienė, 2020). Yet, they continue to be taught and institutionalized as universal truths, without critical reflection on their historical conditions of emergence. This epistemic continuity illustrates how colonial modes of knowing are perpetuated within the modern global order. The assumptions embedded in these theories—about competitiveness, value, and market rationality—obscure the violence and extraction upon which global trade was historically constructed.

The persistence of these frameworks also marginalizes alternative epistemologies from the Global South. Indigenous, cooperative, and solidaristic economic models rarely feature in mainstream trade discussions, despite their continued relevance in many parts of the world. The knowledge systems that inform these models—grounded in community ethics, ecological balance, and non-capitalist exchange logics—are often dismissed as informal, inefficient, or pre-modern. This epistemic hierarchy mirrors the broader structure of colonial knowledge production, where Western categories are treated as universal and non-Western systems as particular or residual. As a result, the possibility of reimagining trade from radically different foundations is systematically foreclosed.

Postcolonial theory offers critical tools for interrogating the epistemic underpinnings of trade regimes. Scholars such as Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak, and Homi Bhabha have shown how colonial power operates not only through material domination but through representational control. Applying

these insights to trade allows for a rethinking of how economic categories—such as development, growth, and productivity—are historically constructed and politically charged (Côté et al., 2020). For instance, the category of “underdeveloped” economies, frequently used in trade policy, naturalizes inequality by framing it as a condition to be overcome through integration into global markets. This discursive framing masks the historical role of colonial exploitation in producing economic divergence.

Recent shifts in academic and policy discourse suggest the emergence of a counter-epistemology, one that seeks to decolonize trade knowledge by centering histories, voices, and experiences from the Global South. Scholars in critical development studies, feminist political economy, and environmental justice have contributed to this epistemic rupture by questioning the neutrality of economic indicators, the politics of trade agreements, and the myth of market objectivity (C. Li et al., 2018). These interventions challenge the technocratic consensus that has long governed trade policy and open space for new ways of thinking about value, fairness, and sustainability in international commerce. This epistemic shift is not yet dominant, but it represents a crucial front in the struggle for trade justice.

Media and civil society have also played an important role in this transformation. Campaigns for fair trade, ethical sourcing, and corporate accountability have introduced normative concerns into the public debate on global trade. While some of these campaigns have been co-opted by corporate interests, others remain rooted in radical critique and solidarity with marginalized producers. These movements often draw from postcolonial and anti-imperial traditions, reframing trade as a political and ethical issue rather than a purely technical one. They reveal the contested nature of trade narratives and the possibility of popular mobilization around epistemic alternatives.

The epistemic shift is further supported by the rise of Global South think tanks, policy institutes, and academic networks that produce localized knowledge on trade and development. Institutions such as the South Centre in Geneva, the Third World Network in Penang, and the Centre for Trade and Development in New Delhi have contributed to a more pluralistic and critical discourse on trade policy. These organizations challenge the dominance of Northern-based knowledge producers such as the IMF, World Bank, and OECD, offering counter-narratives that are grounded in the specific histories and priorities of developing countries. Their work reflects a growing recognition that trade expertise cannot be monopolized by a single intellectual tradition.

Epistemic shifts also occur within multilateral institutions themselves, albeit more subtly. The growing assertiveness of Global South representatives in WTO debates has introduced alternative vocabularies and problem framings into the negotiation process (Bharti, 2023). Demands for technology transfer, protection of traditional knowledge, and recognition of historical

injustices are now part of trade discourse, even if they remain marginalized in practice. This discursive presence matters because it marks a break from previous eras in which developing countries were expected to passively adopt the rules set by dominant powers. It signals a movement toward epistemic parity, even as institutional asymmetries persist.

At the core of this epistemic resistance is the idea that trade is not merely an exchange of goods but a site of social meaning, cultural production, and political contestation. Understanding trade in this way allows for a rearticulation of its goals—not simply to maximize efficiency or GDP, but to promote dignity, autonomy, and ecological balance. This vision resonates with the values of many postcolonial societies, where economic life is intimately linked to social relations and moral frameworks. It challenges the commodification of labor, land, and life that defines the dominant trade paradigm and proposes instead a relational and ethical approach to global commerce.

Ultimately, the decolonization of trade knowledge requires not only critique but creation. It entails building new conceptual frameworks, pedagogical models, and institutional practices that reflect the diverse realities of the global majority. This is a generational project, involving scholars, activists, policymakers, and communities. It demands the democratization of knowledge production and the validation of epistemologies that have long been excluded from the corridors of global governance. Only through such epistemic pluralism can the promise of a truly just and inclusive trade system be realized.

F. The Role of BRICS and Emerging Alliances

The emergence of BRICS as a geopolitical and economic coalition marks one of the most significant developments in the architecture of postcolonial resistance within global trade. Comprised of Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa, the grouping initially began as a loose economic category but has since evolved into a more coordinated bloc that challenges the dominance of Western-led trade and financial institutions (Chandra Voumik & Sultana, 2022). BRICS represents a collective response to the marginalization experienced by its member states within global economic governance structures such as the WTO, IMF, and World Bank. Its very existence problematizes the North-South divide by asserting the possibility of an alternative axis of cooperation grounded in shared historical experiences of colonialism, developmental exclusion, and structural inequality (Asongu et al., 2018).

One of the most visible instruments of BRICS cooperation is the New Development Bank (NDB), established to offer an alternative to the conditionality-laden lending practices of the IMF and World Bank. By funding infrastructure and sustainable development projects across the Global South, the NDB embodies a form of economic solidarity that breaks from the coercive

logic of Western financial institutions. The Bank's policies are framed in terms of mutual respect, policy autonomy, and non-intervention, principles that reflect the postcolonial ethos of the BRICS framework. In trade terms, the NDB's financing capacity supports the creation of regional production networks that are less vulnerable to external tariff shocks and currency fluctuations imposed by the U.S (Ali et al., 2018).

BRICS has also advanced efforts to de-dollarize trade among its members, facilitating transactions in local currencies and pushing for the creation of an alternative reserve mechanism. This monetary innovation is both a technical and symbolic act of resistance. Technically, it reduces dependency on the U.S. financial system and insulates trade from the volatility of dollar-dominated capital flows. Symbolically, it asserts economic sovereignty and disrupts the post-Bretton Woods order in which U.S. monetary policy indirectly governs global trade dynamics. The establishment of cross-border payment systems and local currency settlement platforms represents a practical step toward a pluriversal economic order, where multiple financial and trade logics coexist (Huang, 2024).

In the realm of tariffs and trade negotiation, BRICS countries have increasingly coordinated their positions within multilateral forums. Whether in WTO debates on agricultural subsidies, digital taxation, or trade-related aspects of intellectual property rights (TRIPS), BRICS members have often articulated a shared opposition to the unequal trade rules crafted by the Global North. India and South Africa's joint TRIPS waiver proposal, supported by Brazil and China, reflects this convergence. Such initiatives signal not only policy alignment but also a deeper political will to reframe trade rules in a way that recognizes historical injustices and developmental asymmetries (Apergis et al., 2023).

Beyond formal institutions, BRICS has contributed to a discursive realignment in trade diplomacy. The coalition's annual declarations emphasize concepts such as inclusive globalization, sustainable development, and South-South cooperation—terms that contrast sharply with the neoliberal vocabulary of efficiency and competitiveness. These discursive interventions challenge the epistemic authority of Western institutions by proposing alternative value frameworks for international economic engagement. While some critics argue that BRICS reproduces hierarchical dynamics internally, its collective interventions in global forums have opened new discursive spaces for postcolonial articulation and policy experimentation.

Other emerging alliances also reflect the expanding scope of South-South resistance to tariff domination and Western economic coercion. The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), the Eurasian Economic Union (EEAU), and various African and Latin American trade blocs have increasingly engaged in coordinated economic strategies that emphasize regional self-reliance (Chen et al., 2023). Although these organizations differ in scope and ideology, they share a commitment to diversifying trade partners,

reducing dependency on traditional hegemonic markets, and expanding technological and financial sovereignty. These efforts represent a collective response to the volatility and asymmetry of U.S.-centered global trade.

Significantly, these alliances are not only reactive but also prefigurative. They attempt to model alternative modes of economic cooperation based on principles of reciprocity, historical memory, and mutual benefit. Initiatives such as the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) reflect a renewed commitment among African states to build intra-continental economic capacity, challenging the colonial trade patterns that oriented African economies toward extractive export relations with Europe and North America (HAJI, 2021). The emphasis on value-added production, regional supply chains, and institutional integration demonstrates a proactive approach to trade decolonization that does not rely solely on confrontation with Western powers.

The role of BRICS and other emerging alliances must also be understood in relation to shifting global power dynamics. The relative decline of Western economic dominance, exacerbated by internal political instability and the erosion of multilateralism, has opened a geopolitical space for alternative centers of influence (Tahir & Burki, 2023). The Global South is no longer a passive recipient of trade rules but an increasingly assertive participant in shaping them. BRICS's invitation to new members such as Argentina, Egypt, and Iran, and the expansion of its agenda into areas such as food security, digital governance, and climate finance, signal a broadening of its postcolonial mandate beyond trade (Chandra Voumik & Sultana, 2022).

Nevertheless, these alliances face significant internal contradictions. Power asymmetries among members, divergent national interests, and governance challenges limit the coherence of collective action. China's economic dominance within BRICS, for example, raises concerns among smaller members about potential dependency or marginalization within the bloc. Moreover, the geopolitical rivalry between India and China occasionally complicates efforts to present a united front. These tensions reflect the complexity of constructing a postcolonial economic coalition that is both pluralistic and effective. Yet, the very attempt to build such a coalition represents a radical departure from the individualized and asymmetrical trade relationships characteristic of the neoliberal global order.

Despite these limitations, the role of BRICS and emerging alliances in decolonizing trade relations remains pivotal. They represent both an institutional and ideational challenge to U.S. tariff hegemony and the broader trade architecture it supports. By fostering alternative infrastructures, promoting epistemic pluralism, and building political solidarities, these alliances expand the strategic options available to Global South countries. In doing so, they affirm the possibility of a multipolar economic order that is not dictated by the interests of a single hegemon but shaped by the collective agency of formerly colonized nations.

G. Conclusion

The analysis in this paper has demonstrated that the United States' tariff regime functions not merely as an economic policy tool, but as a continuation of a broader historical logic of domination rooted in colonial structures. These tariffs disproportionately target nations in the Global South, not solely for economic reasons, but as part of a wider apparatus of geopolitical discipline. By framing trade relations through a postcolonial lens, this study has uncovered how modern tariff practices retain the asymmetrical patterns of extraction and control that defined colonial trade. What appears as policy pragmatism in official narratives is, upon closer inspection, a strategic assertion of economic hierarchy and conditional inclusion.

Through a detailed examination of both the architecture and application of tariffs, the paper has highlighted the persistence of epistemic and institutional exclusions in global trade governance. The marginalization of alternative economic logics, the universalization of Western trade theories, and the selective enforcement of trade norms all point to a system that operates through both material and symbolic forms of power. Global South nations are not simply disadvantaged by tariffs; they are positioned within a discursive order that delegitimizes their developmental priorities and denies the validity of their historical grievances. This condition underscores the need to go beyond conventional economic analysis and adopt a multidimensional critique that incorporates historical, political, and epistemological insights.

At the same time, this study has shown that postcolonial resistance is neither monolithic nor purely reactive. From South-South cooperation and legal contestation in WTO forums to discursive interventions and institutional innovation, Global South nations have demonstrated significant agency in navigating and challenging the global trade regime. The emergence of BRICS and related alliances reflects a growing will to reshape the terms of global economic engagement. These responses, while uneven and at times contradictory, collectively contribute to a shifting geopolitical landscape where the monopoly over trade norms is increasingly contested. Resistance is thus not a refusal to trade, but a refusal to trade on unequal terms.

The proposal of a decolonial trade ethic, developed in the final section of this paper, seeks to reorient global trade from an extractive and hierarchical enterprise toward one grounded in mutuality, justice, and epistemic plurality. Such an ethic is necessary not only to rectify historical wrongs but to ensure the sustainability of global commerce in an era marked by ecological crisis, political fragmentation, and institutional fatigue. The decolonial turn in trade policy requires both a critique of existing structures and the articulation of alternatives rooted in the lived realities and aspirations of postcolonial societies. It is a call to reimagine trade as a space of encounter and co-creation rather than dominance and dispossession.

Decolonizing trade relations entails more than reforming specific policies; it requires rethinking the philosophical and institutional foundations of the global economic system. Tariffs, when viewed through a postcolonial lens, reveal a persistent logic of control that must be confronted through ethical, intellectual, and political transformation. This paper has contributed to that effort by linking U.S. tariff practices to a broader critique of trade coloniality and by highlighting the diverse forms of resistance emerging across the Global South. As the world enters a period of economic realignment, the imperative to imagine and build a more just and inclusive trade order has never been more urgent.

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