

A Bifurcated Marketplace for World Order: Network Centrality and the US-China Trade Conflict

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While different possible world orders, simply as a matter of logic, must have their architectures constructed by the Great Powers, the demand side of world order—middle powers and smaller states—might well retain agency in determining which world order ultimately prevails. This paper analyses the dynamics of network structures in global trade, investment, and geopolitical voice to examine the contours of a potential bifurcated world order in the wake of the US-China trade conflict. It is in such networks that the choices made by smaller states become most apparent. Using social network analysis the paper finds that the trajectory in these dynamics points to the rise of Asian centrality, the calculated trajectory quantifies this emergence. The estimated arc will only accelerate if the US becomes more autarkic or mercantilist, i.e., should the “America First” strategy become more pronounced, the influence of the US will only continue to diminish.

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I. Introduction

Great Power competition has again forced its way into the explicit consciousness of the general public. In 2018 the US Defense Secretary famously declared (Mattis, 2018):

“Inter-state strategic competition, not terrorism, is now the primary concern in US national security.

“China is a strategic competitor using predatory economics to intimidate its neighbours while militarizing features in the South China Sea. Russia has violated the borders of nearby nations and pursues veto power over the economic, diplomatic, and security decisions of its neighbors”

with, more generally, the phrases *Great Power competition* and *inter-state strategic competition* being used synonymously (US Department of Defense, 2018).

In such thinking, it is not just the US that needs to confront the challenges raised by these specific strategic rivals. The wider community of nations and the international order itself are under threat: the revisionist powers China and Russia “want to shape a world consistent with their authoritarian model — gaining veto power over other nations’ economic, diplomatic, and security decisions” and “undermining the international order from within the system by exploring its benefits while simultaneously undercutting its principles and ‘rules of the road’ ” (Mattis, 2018).

This narrative on America’s geostrategic rivals becomes especially sharp on China, where it seeps into widespread popular discourse and thus affects national policy-making. Barkin (2019) describes the biggest geopolitical challenge of the 21st century to be how the West responds to “the rise of an authoritarian China”, detailing how China’s ruling party is Leninist; how China shows disdain for human rights, free speech, democracy, rule of law, or more generally “our liberal values”; and how in China both state and party exercise control over personal lives. Beyond such systemic objections, specific criticisms arise on how China has sought to spread its influence globally through the Belt and Road Initiative; how China continues unfair trade practices on State Owned Enterprise presence, forced technology transfer, and outright Intellectual Property Rights theft with the World Trade Organisation persistently failing to address complaints registered by the US and others; how China’s state-subsidised tech companies could potentially gain control of the world’s future technological trajectory. The contours of this narrative are so familiar they enter discussion of popular writing: “[...] threats and challenges have escalated, as Chinas global ambitions, especially

in the field of technology, have begun to impinge upon Americas pre-eminence. Disputes about tariffs, intellectual property, and tech infrastructure have become urgent matters of national security” (Fan, 2019).

In this identification of geopolitical forces, the rational response for members of the US-led international order is to raise one’s defenses and put in place effective counter-measures. The US-China trade conflict is but the most visible of such re-energised Great Power Competition. Moreover, the phrasings I have cited suggest that economic competition comprises just one of a number of possible problem areas: concerns over values and security will grow in prominence. The eventual outcome will have to be some reconciliation between these geostrategic rivals who have different views on how to conduct relations among the international community of nation states. What form will direct strategic competition assume between the Great Powers? Which Great Power will be ascendant? Which conceptualisation of rule of law will come to characterise a potential new world order?

However, an observationally equivalent interplay of forces might be at work, admitting a different identification. Rather than analysing the competition in terms of only head-on conflict between the Great Powers, this paper suggests an alternative mechanism. The background hypothesis here is that Great Powers will succeed in imposing their preferred modality for international engagement, only as long as global demand is sufficiently high for that specific modality. In other words, the provision by Great Powers of alternative frameworks for international engagement is only the supply side; it will take understanding the demand side as well to come to a view on the equilibrium outcome. Great Power rivalry is then nothing more than supply-side competition in a marketplace where, ultimately, it is the demand side that validates a particular outcome on offer from potential suppliers (Quah, 2019a).

This is not to say that Great Power suppliers will meekly be price-takers, or that supply-side competition follows the rules of peace-abiding, perfectly competitive markets. The marketplace paradigm permits fierce unfair competition—monopolists can exploit their position to advantage, extracting all surplus for just themselves; oligopolists can establish beach-head advantage in preliminary competition and then turn predatory in the endgame. But the key idea that a marketplace approach highlights is that final outcomes are not the domain of determination of Great Powers alone. In suggesting this, the framework allows but does not insist that small states can play a key role in helping decide geopolitical outcomes.¹

¹This only seeks to relax rather than contradict the modelling assumption in Waltz (1979) where “It would be as ridiculous to construct a theory of international politics based on Malaysia and Costa Rica

China and Russia might well be grouped together as revisionist powers, but they have also traversed significantly different trajectories of development. In the last four decades China has lifted over 600mn of its people out of extreme poverty, grown in economic footprint over seventy-fold, and increased its trade with the world more than 110 times (author's calculations from World Bank World Development Indicators and IMF trade statistics). Russia has done none of these. The US sees itself on the side opposing China and Russia, but in its dynamics over the last four decades in income inequality and well-being of its lower income class, its trajectory resembles Russia's more than any other large nation (Quah, 2019c,b).

The respective bundles—economic success, political contention, and so on—that alternative providers of international leadership might need to be scrutinised with care under different lenses.

This paper takes the US-China trade conflict as a laboratory to study different potential outcomes of geopolitical rivalry. The demand collective—nation states not themselves on the frontlines of geostrategic competition—would obviously prefer not to have to choose sides in this game of Great Power rivalry. But such choice might already quietly, gradually be being made, independent of whether the space of possible navigation eventually narrows to where such a sudden, discrete choice is inevitable, or whether gradually, that demand collective is slowly gravitating more into the orbit of one or the other of alternative providers of global leadership.

The remainder of this paper is organised as follows. Section II lays out briefly some facts and logic to the US-China trade conflict. Section III presents the results of empirical calculations on the evidence of trade flows, investment, and voice surrounding this trade conflict. Its goal is assess what coalitional or clustering patterns might have emerged from the historical trajectory of trade. This Section develops the notion of *trade essentiality*, as a way to evaluate the world's trading coalitions implicitly forming.

Finally, Section IV concludes.

as it would be to construct an economic theory of oligopolistic competition based on the minor firms in a sector of the economy." In the structure in this paper small states do not just act as minor firms on the supply side; instead, taken together, the small states constitute a significant driving force on the demand side.

II. US-China Trade Conflict

Some history and facts surrounding the US-China Trade Conflict

III. Coalitional Emergence

This section reports the results from empirical-based calculations designed to help shed light on possible re-alignments in a new world order.

A. Trade

An observation regularly made is that China's growing trade openness has made other nations increasingly attentive to China's demands. In this reasoning, China has, through the force of economics alone, made many others its partners. White (2013, p. 44) describes the relation between China and Australia in the following terms:

China is not only Australia's biggest trading partner today; it is also seen as the locomotive for future growth. That gives Australia an immense stake in China's economic success, and in good relations with Beijing.

This sentiment can, indeed, be repeated unmodified for many other nations, only switching in each case the proper name of the trading partner.

Such logic cannot be faulted. However, the characterisation is coarse and not informative for the questions of interest in this paper. Does it matter how much trade there is between China and any given national economy of interest? Is there a fixed threshold of trade volume above which a trading partner's stake in China's success become overwhelming? More important, the same fixed level of China trade openness could be put to exchange with just five other principal trading partners, or it could diffused across a hundred different trading relationships with a cross section of nations: Does one network configuration or the other imply greater global attentiveness to China's demands? Given a fixed level of trade openness, is China more central in the global economy if it trades a lot with just a small number of nations, or if it divides up that trade openness across many nations? Trade openness by itself is not informative for how and what coalitions will emerge; growing trading volume alone, without knowledge on the network configuration of China's trading partners, does not inform on whether China really is increasingly central in the global economy.

(These need to be redone into prose that flows.)

- 1) The US-China trade conflict is valuable to study both on its own and in conjunction with the traditional framework of geopolitical rivalry.
- 2) Of particular interest here because trade is two-way exchange, where ideally, both parties gain.

- 3) But also precisely because it is a two-way exchange, the short side rules. Protectionism. Anyone has veto power.
- 4) Choices made on trade therefore reflect outcome of an earlier deeper calculation on costs and benefits, and the balance between them.

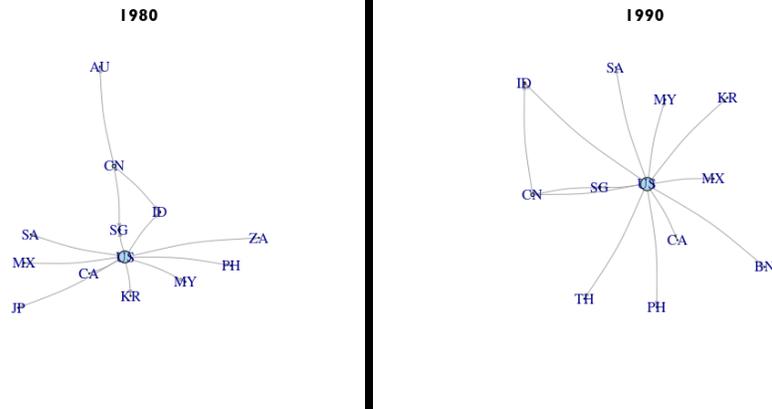


FIGURE 1. US, CHINA TRADE NETWORKS (LEFT) 1980, RIGHT (1990).

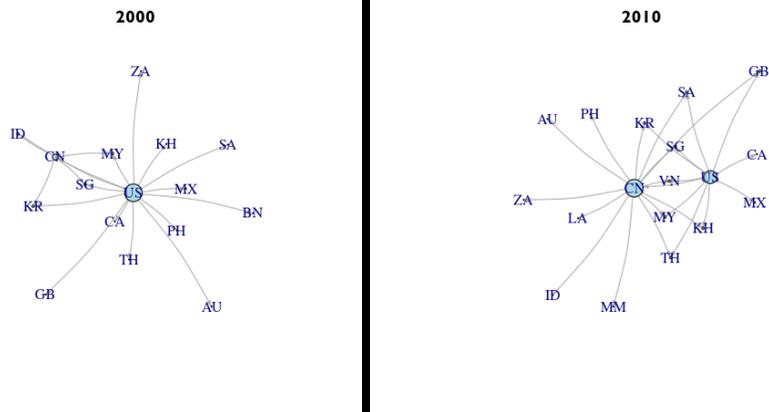


FIGURE 2. US, CHINA TRADE NETWORKS (LEFT) 2000, RIGHT (2010).

(Introduce the idea of essentiality)

- 1) Not just exports but total trade: exports and imports. Because there can be gains and potential costs to both. US trade policy focus on just the

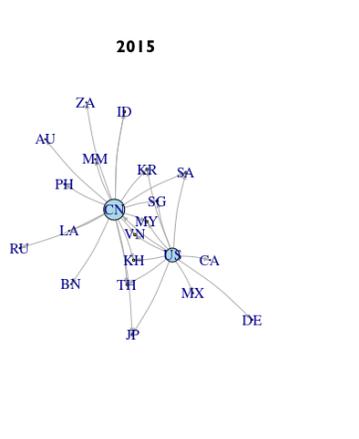


FIGURE 3. US, CHINA TRADE NETWORKS 2015.

difference between them, i.e., the trade deficit. Couple of sentences what that shows and doesn't show — in particular, not “winning” or “losing” Take total trade relative to size of economy. Call this *trade essentiality*: Number bounded from below by zero. Can potentially exceed one. The larger value, the more important (hence *essentiality*). Zero, on the other hand, means that counterpart economy is irrelevant to me.

- 2) Related application Kim and Solingen (2019)
- 3) Take perspective of a given home economy, perhaps a small state. When looking at bilateral with, say, the US, trade essentiality shows the importance of US trade to me. Example: from perspective of India, US trade essentiality in 1980 only 1.6%. In contrast, in year 2000, US trade essentiality for Canada 54%; for Mexico, 36%.

G20

First consider the G20. Of course, both US and China are G20 members so the question is, how does trade essentiality look with either the US or China across the remaining 19 member states?

US	G20-5%-emergent trade cluster (Essentiality in %)		
	Count	Average	Members +1 (in descending order)
1980	6	14.1	CA (28.3), MX (14.4), KR (14.0), SA (11.7), ID (9.2), ZA (7.1), JP (4.9)
1990	5	16.6	CA (29.8), MX (22.5), SA (12.6), KR (12.1), CN (5.8), ID (4.9)
2000	8	17.8	CA (54.4), MX (35.7), KR (12.2), SA (11.2), CN (10.1), ID (7.7), ZA (5.4), GB (5.2), AU (4.6)
2010	5	18.9	MX (37.6), CA (32.8), SA (8.4), KR (8.2), CN (7.8), GB (4.1)
2015	6	18.0	MX (46.1), CA (36.9), KR (8.3), SA (6.4), CN (5.4), DE (5.2), JP (4.4)

TABLE 1— G20 member states for whom US trade is, to varying degrees, essential.

BOUNDARY ALLOCATIONS ARE TAKEN ON DATA BEFORE ROUNDING, SO THERE MIGHT APPEAR TO BE MISALLOCATION ERRORS. FOR CONVENIENCE, TWO-DIGIT ISO COUNTRY CODES FOR G20 MEMBER STATES ARE ARGENTINA AR, AUSTRALIA AU, BRAZIL BR, CANADA CA, CHINA CN, GERMANY DE, FRANCE FR, UNITED KINGDOM GB, INDONESIA ID, INDIA IN, ITALY IT, JAPAN JP, REPUBLIC OF KOREA KR, MEXICO MX, RUSSIAN FEDERATION RU, SAUDI ARABIA SA, TURKEY TR, UNITED STATES US, AND SOUTH AFRICA ZA. THE TABLE SHOWS “+1” IN MEMBERS TO HELP INDICATE HOW DEMANDING THE 5% THRESHOLD IS HERE.

Table 1 reports statistics on the distribution of US trade essentiality across the G20. First, I pick a threshold (5%, 10%, 15%, and so on) that allows focusing on those G20 member states for whom US trade essentiality exceeds that given threshold. These are then the G20 member states that will consider the US to be a relatively essential trading partner. All else equal, these are the states that will be more inclined to side with the US.

Any given threshold is, in a sense, arbitrary. I have selected 5% to use, both for Table 1 and the China counterpart Table 2 because it illustrates best the overall trend movement in these implicit trade alliances.

The first column in Table 1 indicates the year; the second the number of G20 member states whose trade essentiality is above that threshold. The third column reports the conditional mean for trade essentiality for those member states that meet that threshold criterion. The higher is this average, the more this group as a whole will feel allied to the US. Finally, the last column reports

The Table shows that Canada and Mexico have high US trade-essentiality. This is unsurprising as these G20 member states are so geographically close to the US.

Notable, however, is how high that essentiality has grown. Following NAFTA's introduction, US trade essentiality for Mexico rose from 14% in 1980 to 46% in 2015—relative to Mexico's GDP, a three-fold increase. In 2015, Mexico's trade with the US amounted to nearly half of Mexico's GDP. By the same token, for Canada, US trade essentiality increased from 28% in 1980 to 37% in 2015. These two nations that share a boundary with the US are also the only two that raise average US trade essentiality; all other nations fall below that average. But apart from Canada and Mexico, for all other G20 nations, US trade essentiality has markedly declined. Indeed, by 2015, the Republic of Korea—the third highest US trade-essential nation—showed its US trade/GDP ratio to be less than half the conditional (5%-threshold) average, leaving Canada and Mexico to account for the largest part of US trade essentiality in the G20. In the table, China reached peak US in 2000 at 10% but by 2015 US trade essentiality had halved, leaving China to just barely make the 5% threshold in the Table's cluster categorisation.

CN	G20-5%-emergent trade cluster (Essentiality in %)		
	Count	Average	Members +1 (in descending order)
1980	0		AU (0.9)
1990	0		ID (1.1)
2000	1	6.1	KR (6.1), ID (4.2)
2010	6	8.6	KR (18.9), SA (8.2), AU (7.6), ZA (5.9), ID (5.7), GB (2.0)
2015	6	9.7	KR (19.9), ZA (9.8), SA (8.0), AU (7.8), JP (6.3), ID (6.3), RU (5.0)

TABLE 2— G20 member states for whom China trade is, to varying degrees, essential.

BOUNDARY ALLOCATIONS ARE TAKEN ON DATA BEFORE ROUNDING, SO THERE MIGHT APPEAR TO BE MISALLOCATION ERRORS. FOR CONVENIENCE, TWO-DIGIT ISO COUNTRY CODES FOR G20 MEMBER STATES ARE ARGENTINA AR, AUSTRALIA AU, BRAZIL BR, CANADA CA, CHINA CN, GERMANY DE, FRANCE FR, UNITED KINGDOM GB, INDONESIA ID, INDIA IN, ITALY IT, JAPAN JP, REPUBLIC OF KOREA KR, MEXICO MX, RUSSIAN FEDERATION RU, SAUDI ARABIA SA, TURKEY TR, UNITED STATES US, AND SOUTH AFRICA ZA. THE TABLE SHOWS "+1" IN MEMBERS TO HELP INDICATE HOW DEMANDING THE 5% THRESHOLD IS HERE.

Table 2 shows the same analysis for China's trading partners. The most notable feature here is the pace of rising China trade essentiality across the G20.

The early part of the sample showed China's near total absence across G20 nation trading profiles. Even as late as 1990 peak trade essentiality appeared in Indonesia at only 1%. But by 2015, for 6 G20 nations, trade with China amounted

to more than 5% of GDP. Trade essentiality for Russia (the “+1” in the 2015 row of the Table) was 4.98%; after Russia came Germany at 4.64%, and then Brazil at 4.0%. If the calculation had rounded to the zero-th decimal point, there would have been an additional two trading partners making the 5% cutoff.

The key conclusion from Tables 1 and 2 is this: In the last four decades G20 trade with China has risen in significance not just as a matter of sheer volume, but also in expanse. No G20 nation throughout the 1980s saw China as an important trading partner; by 2015, nearly half of them did. In contrast, the breadth of US trade has dramatically reduced: US trade-essentiality is now concentrated in just the two nations with whom the US shares a significant geographical border: Canada and Mexico.

ASEAN

Just as one can consider potential alliances among the G20 for China or the US, so too does ASEAN present a possible set of trade-motivated allies. Tables 3 and 4 that now follow present analogous calculations for ASEAN, as Tables 1 and 2 had previously done for the G20. However, ASEAN members have, typically, smaller and more open economies than advanced nations. All else equal this raises the numerator and lowers the denominator in calculating trade essentiality, and thus one would expect the entire distribution of trade essentialities to be higher. Therefore here I have set a more demanding threshold trade-essentiality at 10%, to improve clarity in these trading pattern dynamics.

Table 3 shows the history of high US trade essentiality across all the ASEAN member states. Even at threshold 10% the qualifying economies amounted to a third of the entire ASEAN membership. However, despite that membership remaining constant, the conditional mean of US trade essentiality has declined, from a high of 30% in 2000, down to 18% by 2015. Thus, trade essentiality—while still high—has been steadily falling. In 1980 the ASEAN member state with highest US trade essentiality was Singapore at 42%; in 2000, Malaysia at 40%. However, for both these member states US trade essentiality has sharply fallen: By 2015 trade essentiality stood at only 16% for each. Vietnam and Cambodia were the lead ASEAN states in 2015, at 23% and 19% respectively, compared to Malaysia and Singapore in 2000 at almost 40%.

Finally, Table 4 shows China trade essentiality across ASEAN. Up through 1990, China showed no trade essentiality across ASEAN: the maximum observation was for Singapore at 5% in 1980 and 8% in 1990. However, from 2000—when only Singapore made the cut at 11%—more and more ASEAN member states have begun to show trade essentiality exceeding 10%. Indeed by 2015, every single one of the ASEAN states showed a China essentiality exceeding 10%. In 2015 the

US	ASEAN-10%-emergent trade cluster (Essentiality in %)		
	Count	Average	Members +1 (in descending order)
1980	3	23.6	SG (42.2), MY (16.4), PH (12.1), ID (9.2)
1990	4	23.6	SG (50.1), MY (20.2), PH (13.8), TH (10.0), BN (6.6)
2000	5	29.9	MY (39.3), SG (38.7), PH (28.2), KH (24.4), TH (18.8), BN (9.2)
2010	4	18.8	KH (22.7), SG (19.8), VN (16.9), MY (15.9), TH (9.6)
2015	4	18.4	VN (23.3), KH (18.9), SG (15.8), MY(15.6), TH (10.0)

TABLE 3— ASEAN member states for whom US trade is, to varying degrees, essential.

BOUNDARY ALLOCATIONS ARE TAKEN ON DATA BEFORE ROUNDING, SO THERE MIGHT APPEAR TO BE MIS-ALLOCATION ERRORS. FOR CONVENIENCE, TWO-DIGIT ISO COUNTRY CODES FOR ASEAN MEMBER STATES ARE BRUNEI DARUSSALAM BN, CAMBODIA KH, INDONESIA ID, LAOS LA, MALAYSIA MY, MYANMAR MM, THE PHILIPPINES PH, SINGAPORE SG, THAILAND TH, AND VIETNAM VN. THE TABLE SHOWS “+1” IN MEMBERS TO HELP INDICATE HOW DEMANDING THE 10% THRESHOLD IS HERE.

conditional average [by then also the unconditional average] China essentiality of 24% exceeded that of the US of 18%.

The key conclusion from Tables 3 and 4 is that across ASEAN China’s rise as trading partner has been both deep and wide, now encompassing all ASEAN member states at 10% threshold essentiality, while the US has remained important— but not gained ground—and concentrated in less than half of ASEAN.

B. Investment

(Might put in related discussion on foreign direct investment and its changing patterns over time)

C. Voice

(Might put in qualitative evidence on perceptions of US and China; focus on WTO adjudication and trade-related global reporting.)

(Among the facts to expand)

- 1) At the end of 2018 China had 42 complaints registered against it from 6 nations or trading blocs; 23 from US alone, 9 from EU.

CN	ASEAN-10%-emergent trade cluster (Essentiality in %)		
	Count	Average	Members +1 (in descending order)
1980	0		SG (5.1)
1990	0		SG (7.9)
2000	1	11.3	SG (11.3), MY (8.6)
2010	7	19.4	MY (29.1), VN (26.0), SG (24.1), TH (15.5), LA (14.6), PH (13.9), KH (12.8), MM (9.0)
2015	9	24.4	VN (46.7), MY (32.9), SG (26.7), KH (24.6), MM (24.5), TH (18.9), LA (17.9), PH (15.6), BN (11.7), ID (6.3)

TABLE 4— ASEAN member states for whom China trade is, to varying degrees, essential. BOUNDARY ALLOCATIONS ARE TAKEN ON DATA BEFORE ROUNDING, SO THERE MIGHT APPEAR TO BE MIS-ALLOCATION ERRORS. FOR CONVENIENCE, TWO-DIGIT ISO COUNTRY CODES FOR ASEAN MEMBER STATES ARE BRUNEI DARUSSALAM BN, CAMBODIA KH, INDONESIA ID, LAOS LA, MALAYSIA MY, MYANMAR MM, THE PHILIPPINES PH, SINGAPORE SG, THAILAND TH, AND VIETNAM VN. THE TABLE SHOWS “+1” IN MEMBERS TO HELP INDICATE HOW DEMANDING THE 10% THRESHOLD IS HERE.

- 2) At the same time the US had 163 complaints registered against it from 28 nations or trading blocs, with 15 from China but 34—more than double the number of Chinese complaints—from the EU.

IV. Conclusions

This paper has used a discussion of trade patterns as an indicator of how different alliances might emerge over course of the US-China trade conflict.

(Expand into flowing prose)

- 1) Trade is a two-way exchange. Short side rules. Both supply and demand matter.
- 2) But at the same time larger nations likely have greater power in the exchange.
- 3) The outcome weighs off costs and benefits in the engagement with whichever other nation state.
- 4) In the last four decades G20 trade with China has risen in significance not just as a matter of sheer volume, but also in expanse. No G20 nation throughout the 1980s saw China as an important trading partner; by 2015, nearly half of them did.
- 5) In contrast, the breadth of US trade has dramatically reduced: US trade-essentiality is now concentrated in just the two nations with whom the US shares a significant geographical border: Canada and Mexico.
- 6) Across ASEAN China's rise as trading partner has been both deep and wide, beginning from near-invisible presence to now encompassing all ASEAN member states at high levels of trade essentiality.
- 7) The US has remained important but has not gained new ground; its essentiality is concentrated in no more than half of ASEAN.

When any trade conflict or other disruption in the international system raises the probability of even more profound change, it is in the interest of every nation state to re-examine traditional arrangements and to prepare contingency plans for alternative outcomes. Such plans necessarily balance the costs and benefits of different strategies.

If world order bifurcates and nation states are encouraged to choose sides, how trade patterns have worked for the nationa will be a critical element in that decision. This paper has quantified how a choice between the US and China will need to balance the strength, breadth, and dynamics of trade links that have been built up over the decades following 1980. The incipient cluster of trade networks in East Asia appear to have both momentum and weight of numbers relative to trade networks elsewhere. Since trade is a quintessential two-way exchange—both

demand and supply count equally—these already in-place dynamics, as a matter of logic, can only accelerate if the US grows more autarkic or more demanding in its trading arrangements in general.

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