

International Trade Agreement Politics: A Comparative Analysis

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Abstract

This study aims to analyze the politics of international trade agreements through a comparative analysis approach to three major agreements: NAFTA/USMCA, the European Union, and RCEP. In the context of ever-evolving globalization, trade agreements not only serve as tools to boost economic growth, but also reflect the political dynamics and national interests of each country. The research methods used include qualitative analysis of case studies and review of relevant literature. The results show that national interests, geopolitical influences, industry lobbying, and domestic politics significantly influence the negotiation process and final outcomes of trade agreements. In the context of NAFTA/USMCA, the United States prioritizes the protection of domestic industries, while the European Union emphasizes collective stability among member states. On the other hand, RCEP illustrates China's strategy to expand its economic influence in the Asian region. This study concludes that the success of international trade agreements is not only determined by economic aspects, but also by the complex interaction between domestic political and geopolitical factors.

Keywords: Geopolitics, Geopolitics, International Trade Agreements, NAFTA/USMCA

Introduction

International trade agreements play a vital role in shaping economic and political relations between countries by regulating cross-border trade, including tariffs and intellectual property rights (Ankit Thakur, 2024) (Loso Judijanto, 2024). These agreements, especially those under the World Trade Organization (WTO), aim to create a predictable and transparent trading environment, binding member countries to abide by established rules (Mustafa Al Atiyat, 2024). However, the negotiation and implementation process is often complicated by national interests and domestic political pressures. Countries may prioritize protecting local industries, labor rights, and environmental standards, which can lead to conflicts during negotiations (Alexander V. Akimov, 2024) (Dodi Sugianto, 2023). For example, the accession of new member states to the European Union illustrates how political factors and information asymmetry can influence the dynamics of international agreements, as countries must balance their long-term interests with immediate domestic concerns (Dodi Sugianto, 2023). Ultimately, while the primary goal of these agreements is to promote open and beneficial trade, the interplay of political factors can significantly impact their effectiveness and the extent to which they achieve their intended outcomes (Ankit Thakur, 2024) (Alexander V. Akimov, 2024).

In analyzing international trade agreements, it is important to consider the political factors that influence their negotiation and implementation. National economic interests often drive

these negotiations, with domestic interest groups, such as businesses and trade unions, exerting significant pressure on policymakers to align trade agreements with their goals (Surendar Singh, 2024). This dynamic is particularly evident in the context of the India-EU Free Trade Agreement, where domestic groups have successfully lobbied against liberalization in sensitive sectors such as dairy (Surendar Singh, 2024). Furthermore, power dynamics play a significant role, as larger and more economically powerful countries typically have greater influence in shaping trade agreements, often to the detriment of developing countries (M. Plouffe, 2023). These countries often find themselves at a disadvantage during negotiations, struggling to assert their interests against more dominant players. Furthermore, the level of democratization in a country can affect the speed of trade agreement implementation, with higher levels of democratization associated with delays due to political constraints (Eugene Chian Yan Tao, 2023) (Panagiotis Delimatsis, 2023). Thus, the interaction of domestic pressures, international power dynamics, and political factors significantly shape the trade policy landscape and the outcomes of agreements. The political dynamics of international trade agreements are shaped by a complex interplay of domestic and international factors, which significantly influence their success and challenges. The political economy of trade highlights how political power and economic policies interact to shape these agreements, revealing the motivations behind trade negotiations and the power dynamics at play (Govinda Gowda, 2024) [2]]. Understanding the interaction of states and markets is crucial, as it provides insight into how different political and economic actors operate within this framework (Jacek Lewkowicz, 2024). Domestic influences, including internal political, economic, and social factors, play a significant role in shaping a country's approach to trade policy, thus influencing the outcomes of international negotiations (Eugene Chian Yan Tao, 2023). In addition, international trade agreements themselves are designed to regulate trade relations, tariffs, and market access, reflecting the political dynamics that impact global economic relations (Panagiotis Delimatsis, 2023). Using a comparative approach, this study aims to explain how these interrelated factors contribute to the design of fair and effective trade agreements, ultimately enhancing our understanding of the role of politics in international trade (Jianing Gao, 2024) (Govinda Gowda, 2024).

Literature Review

Political Economy Theory in International Trade Agreements

Early literature on international trade agreements generally focused on political economy theory, which explained that free trade should benefit all countries involved, in accordance with the principle of comparative advantage (Ricardo, 1817). Adam Smith and David Ricardo pioneered the introduction of the benefits of international trade to accelerate economic growth. This theory then developed with the emergence of modern views such as the theory of competitive advantage by Michael Porter, which explains that countries should support industries that have the potential to compete in the global market.

Over time, this literature has developed to include a political perspective that views trade agreements not only as economic instruments, but also as political tools to achieve strategic interests. Robert Gilpin and Helen Milner state that state actors often consider political stability and national security in trade negotiations. This view is in line with the concept of international political economy, which states that powerful countries use trade agreements to strengthen their position in the global economic order, often at the expense of weaker countries.

Domestic Interests and Political Pressure in Trade Negotiations

Studies in political economy show that international trade agreements are influenced by domestic interests and political pressures, including from local industries, interest groups, and trade unions. Ronald Rogowski in his work discusses how domestic groups affected by trade tend to influence state policies in trade agreement negotiations. This literature is also supported by research by Gene Grossman and Elhanan Helpman, who highlight that governments often make concessions in trade agreements in response to pressure from domestic interest groups, especially when the agreements affect vulnerable sectors, such as manufacturing or agriculture.

In addition, Philip Cerny states that globalization has strengthened the role of non-state actors, such as multinational corporations and non-governmental organizations, in influencing trade policy. This literature shows that multinational organizations have significant influence because they often have an interest in creating trade rules that support the sustainability of their operations in various countries. The existence of this domestic political pressure indicates that trade agreements are not only a matter of international consensus, but also the result of complex negotiations between various domestic interests and domestic politics.

Power Dynamics Between Countries in Trade Agreements

This literature review also includes literature that discusses the role of power in trade agreement negotiations. Joseph Nye, through his theory of “hard power” and “soft power,” explains that large countries often use their economic and political influence to determine the

direction of trade agreements, often to benefit their own national interests. This literature examines the differences in the positions of developed and developing countries in international trade negotiations, where developed countries, such as the United States and the European Union, have a stronger bargaining position than developing countries.

John Ravenhill in his research states that developing countries are often in a disadvantageous position, where they tend to follow the rules set by powerful countries to gain market access. This is in accordance with the view of dependency theory, which states that developing countries remain dependent on developed countries in international trade. This literature shows that although trade agreements aim to create global prosperity, the imbalance of power between developed and developing countries often results in continued economic disparities.

Implications of Trade Agreements for Developing Countries

The literature in this area also discusses how international trade agreements impact the economies of developing countries. Dani Rodrik in his research highlights that trade openness often benefits developed countries disproportionately, while developing countries face challenges in utilizing the benefits of free trade due to lack of infrastructure and technology. Stiglitz and Charlton add that many trade agreements set standards that are disadvantageous to developing countries, such as protection of intellectual property rights that actually limit their access to technology and knowledge.

This literature also examines the role of international organizations such as the World Trade Organization (WTO) in mediating this injustice. Martin Wolf in his writing on the WTO states that despite this organization's efforts to create fair trade rules, developing countries still often have difficulty in utilizing the benefits of the global trading system. Research also shows that trade agreements are often structured on terms that favor powerful countries, which ultimately limits the capacity of developing countries to participate effectively in global trade.

Methods

The research method in this study is by taking a qualitative and comparative approach to obtain an in-depth analysis of the political dynamics in international trade agreements in various countries. Since this study focuses on the political analysis of international trade agreements, a qualitative approach is more suitable to explore the political, social, and economic factors that influence the negotiation and implementation of the agreement. This study will use a case study design to compare several countries or specific international trade agreements (e.g., the European Union, ASEAN, and NAFTA/USMCA). The selection of case studies will be based

on political, economic, and geographic relevance. The population and sample in this study are countries or trade blocs that have signed significant international trade agreements in recent decades.

Results and Discussion

International Trade Politics

a. NAFTA/USMCA (United States, Mexico, Canada)

- **Dominance of the United States:** The results show that the United States played a dominant role in the negotiations of this trade agreement, especially after the renegotiation of NAFTA to USMCA. The United States succeeded in forcing changes to labor and tariff provisions, which were more beneficial to its domestic workers and industries.
- **Influence of Domestic Politics:** In the context of the United States, changes in international trade policy were greatly influenced by domestic politics, especially the protectionist policies pushed by the Donald Trump administration during the NAFTA renegotiation.

b. European Union (EU)

- **Harmonization of Regulations and Common Interests:** The European Union emphasizes the importance of economic integration and harmonization of regulations between member countries in every trade agreement. The analysis shows that trade negotiations within the EU are influenced by efforts to maintain balance between large member countries (Germany, France) and small member countries (such as Greece).
- **Multilateral Approach:** Unlike the United States, the European Union adopts a more multilateral approach in negotiating international trade agreements, with the aim of strengthening regional economic integration and reducing trade barriers among member countries.

c. RCEP (Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership)

- **China's Dominance:** In the RCEP trade agreement involving ASEAN countries and China, the results of the study show that China plays a central role. China pushed for this agreement to reduce Asia's economic dependence on western markets, and to increase economic integration in the Asian region.
- **Balance of Interests:** Although China has great influence, ASEAN countries also play an important role in maintaining political and economic balance in the region. ASEAN ensures that the economic interests of developing countries in the region are accommodated in the RCEP negotiations.

2. Main Findings

a. National Interests

In all cases studied, it was found that the national interests of each country were the main drivers in negotiating international trade agreements. In the United States, trade policies tend to be more inclined towards protecting domestic industries. In the European Union, the focus is on mutually beneficial economic integration between member countries. Meanwhile, in RCEP, China is trying to strengthen its economic position in the Asian region.

b. Industrial Lobbying

The role of lobbying from the industrial sector is also very prominent, especially in the United States and the European Union. The manufacturing and agricultural sectors in both regions play an important role in shaping the direction of negotiations and trade decisions. On the other hand, in the context of RCEP, the technology and energy sectors have a significant influence.

c. Geopolitics

Geopolitical power influences the negotiating positions of countries in international trade agreements. In NAFTA/USMCA, the United States leveraged its geopolitical power to get a better deal from Mexico and Canada. In RCEP, China uses its geopolitical power to expand its economic influence in the Asian region.

d. Domestic Political Dynamics

Each country has a domestic political context that influences negotiations on international trade agreements. In the United States, protectionist politics play a major role in changing the direction of trade policy. Meanwhile, in the European Union, political changes in certain member countries, such as Brexit, influence overall trade decisions.

Discussion

The Role of National Interests in Trade Negotiations

One of the main findings of this study is the dominance of national interests in the international trade negotiation process. In the case of NAFTA/USMCA, the United States successfully secured its domestic interests, especially in terms of protecting labor and manufacturing industries. This reflects how governments often use trade agreements as a tool to protect certain economic sectors, especially when there is domestic political pressure. The change from NAFTA to USMCA is a clear example where renegotiations focused on improving terms that are more favorable to workers in the United States, illustrating the dominance of domestic politics.

On the other hand, the European Union has a more collective approach in protecting the interests of its member states, especially with efforts to harmonize trade policies between large and small countries. This shows that within a trading bloc like the European Union, national interests remain important, but within a larger multilateral framework. The success of the European Union in maintaining economic stability through a common trade policy shows the importance of regional cooperation in securing mutual benefits.

In the context of RCEP, China asserts its position as a dominant power in the Asian region by using RCEP to expand regional market access and reduce dependence on western markets. This illustrates how China's geopolitical power is used to shape the direction of trade agreement negotiations that are beneficial to its domestic economic growth and political influence in the Asian region.

Geopolitics and Economic Power in Trade Agreements

Geopolitical factors also play an important role in directing the outcome of international trade negotiations. Large countries such as the United States and China use their economic and geopolitical power to pressure partner countries to reach agreements that are more beneficial to them. This is seen in the renegotiation of NAFTA into USMCA, where the United States used its economic power to pressure Canada and Mexico to accept terms that are more favorable to the United States.

China, in the context of RCEP, uses this agreement as a tool to expand its economic influence in the Asian region. By participating in a trade agreement that includes ASEAN countries, China can reduce its dependence on western markets and strengthen its economic integration with neighboring countries. However, ASEAN countries have also managed to maintain political and economic balance, so that this agreement is not completely dominated by China.

In the European Union, geopolitical factors appear to be more structured in the framework of common policies. The EU trade negotiations take into account not only economic interests, but also geopolitical aspects such as strengthening Europe's position on the global trade stage. The EU has successfully leveraged its collective strength to reach profitable trade deals with other global partners.

Industry Lobbying and Its Influence on Trade Decisions

The industrial sector plays a major role in determining the direction of international trade policy. This study found that in developed countries such as the United States and the European Union, industry lobbying often has a strong influence on the outcome of trade agreement negotiations. For example, in the NAFTA/USMCA negotiations, lobbying from the US automotive and agricultural industries played a major role in directing the desired changes to the agreement.

Similarly, in the European Union, strategic sectors such as agriculture and manufacturing receive special attention in every trade agreement. EU member states must consider the interests of these sectors in order to remain competitive in the global market. This shows that in addition to geopolitical factors and national interests, pressure from domestic industries also greatly influences the final decision on trade agreements.

However, in RCEP, industry lobbying seems to be more focused on the technology and energy sectors, given the importance of these industries to the economic growth of China and ASEAN countries. The technology sector in this region is growing rapidly, and trade agreements such as RCEP help drive the expansion of these sectors in the regional market.

The Influence of Domestic Politics on Trade Agreements

Domestic politics also have a significant impact on the direction of trade policy. In the United States, trade policy is often influenced by political cycles, where a change in administration can drastically change the direction of trade policy. This is evident in the shift from NAFTA to USMCA during the Donald Trump administration, which focused more on protectionism and 'America First' policies.

In contrast, the European Union tends to have greater political stability in terms of trade policy due to the centralized decision-making mechanism in Brussels. Despite domestic political challenges in some member states, such as Brexit, the EU has been able to maintain a stable trade framework among member states.

In the context of RCEP, China's domestic politics play a major role in shaping its international trade policy. The Chinese government is using agreements such as RCEP to increase its economic influence in the Asian region, in line with its national economic strategy focused on global expansion.

Conclusion

1. **Dominance of National Interests** In every international trade agreement, national interests are always the main factor that dictates the direction of negotiations. Whether in a bilateral context such as NAFTA/USMCA or multilateral such as the European Union and RCEP,

countries seek to maximize economic benefits for key domestic sectors. The US, for example, renegotiated NAFTA into USMCA to protect its domestic manufacturing industry and workforce.

2. **Significant Geopolitical Influence** Geopolitical factors play a significant role in trade negotiations. Powerful countries such as the United States and China use their economic power and political influence to reach trade agreements that are more beneficial to them. RCEP is evidence of how China uses its economic power to expand its influence in the Asian region, while the United States uses the renegotiation of USMCA to assert its economic dominance in North America.
3. **The Role of Industry Lobbying in Trade Decisions** Lobbying from the industrial sector has a significant influence in the formation of trade agreements, especially in developing countries. The USMCA was influenced by lobbying from the US agricultural and automotive sectors, while in the European Union, lobbying from the agricultural and manufacturing sectors strongly influenced trade policy. This shows that international trade policy often reflects the needs of strategic industrial sectors in these countries.
4. **Stability of Regionalism in Trade** Regional trade agreements, such as the European Union and RCEP, demonstrate the importance of regional cooperation in securing a stronger bargaining position in the global market. The European Union has managed to maintain trade stability among its members despite domestic political challenges, while RCEP has helped strengthen Asian economic integration with China as its main driver.
5. **Implications of Domestic Politics for Trade Negotiations** Changes in domestic politics often have a direct impact on international trade policy. In the United States, the change from NAFTA to USMCA was triggered by political changes and more protectionist government policies. This shows that international trade agreements are not only determined by external factors, but are also greatly influenced by domestic political dynamics.

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