



Southern China International MUN

Security Council: On measures to develop a feasible balance between free trade and protectionism during the COVID-19 pandemic

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1. Description of the Issue

1.1 History of the Issue

In December of 2019, a strain of virus was discovered in Wuhan, China. This disease, later known as **COVID-19**, or SARS-CoV-2, eventually unfolded into an unprecedented global pandemic, disseminating to every corner of the world. Due to the uncontrollable infections appearing worldwide, the decision made by numerous countries was to implement a lockdown, which not only meant closing borders on their own parts, but also suspending major correspondences with other countries respectively. Along with this, came changes in international trade overall. Limitations in exports/imports of food and other durable goods, rising shipping costs, disruptions of ports, and gaps in service merchandise—problems that leave the economy devastated arise one after another. These situations are temporary for a majority of nations, but some are still struggling in this perpetual cycle of economic decline. It is a longing hope that the world may resume and return to its state pre-pandemic, but the free flow of goods, like any other point in time, must be approached with extreme caution. It is imperative, especially amid a global pandemic, that each separate economic entity is protected from further threats, if not ensured their basic interests.

To reach a certain peaceful equilibrium in international trade, the outlook has always been striking a feasible and agreeable balance between free trade and protectionism. As defined by the World Trade Organization (WTO), **free trade** is a multilateral trading system that “encourages the free flow of goods, fair competition, transparency, predictability, and the alleviation of discrimination between countries that form trade agreements.”¹ Free trade essentially comes in the form of promoting the absence of any legal barriers to the exchange of goods worldwide. What this means is that government-imposed measures, such as taxes, tariffs, quotas, subsidies, or any other parliamentary regulations, is eliminated from the scenario. Free trade has its many advantages. Namely, a few include the stimulation of economic growth, increase in capital from foreign investments, and nurturing of expertise and technological exchange.² However, with the

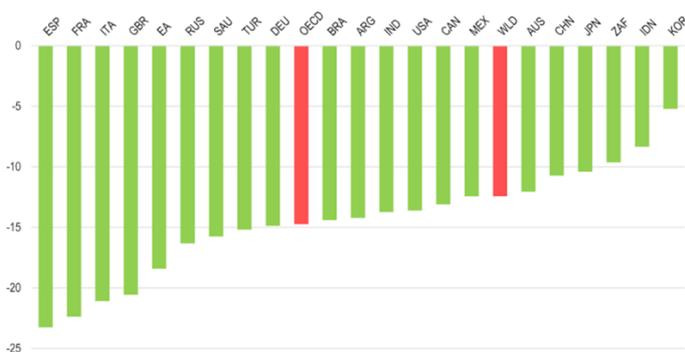
absence of trade barriers emerge a number of problems: increased job outsourcing, over-competition for domestic industries, reduced tax revenues, and risk of theft of intellectual property, among many others.² Consequently, countries face challenges of unemployment, loss in income, and depletion of social welfare overall. This concavity is counteracted by protectionism, the opposing ideal of free trade, as governments feel the need for limitation.

Protectionism is when a country’s government “imposes various restrictions on the free movement of goods between two or more countries.”³ The nature of protectionist policies is to *protect* domestic industries from foreign competitors occupying market share. Apart from the tactics mentioned above (tax, subsidies, tariffs, quotas, trade licenses, etc.), protectionism also tackles **dumping**, which takes place when “imported goods have a significantly lower price in foreign markets than its price in the country of origin.”⁴ Being a protectionist regulation, anti-dumping policies allow room for domestic companies to compete with imports from foreign countries.

Achieving the balance between free trade and protectionism has never been easy. Amidst a pandemic and extensive lockdown worldwide, more challenges inevitably surfaced.

Focusing the timeline on March 2020, COVID-19 came to be considered both in terms of spread and severity a global pandemic.⁵ At this time, the *Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development Interim Economic Outlook* reported that the global growth in GDP was reduced in half to 1.5%. By June of 2020, there was a visible 13% decline in global GDP. Reportedly, the greatest decline between 2019Q4 and 2020Q2 was endured by Spain, with nearly a 23% drop in GDP.⁶ (*Note: Q refers to yearly quintile divisions) The waters weren’t shallow for other nations too. While developed countries faced shocks in their own supplies and limited exports and imports internationally, developing countries dealt majorly with the lack of COVID-related products to meet overwhelming demands domestically.

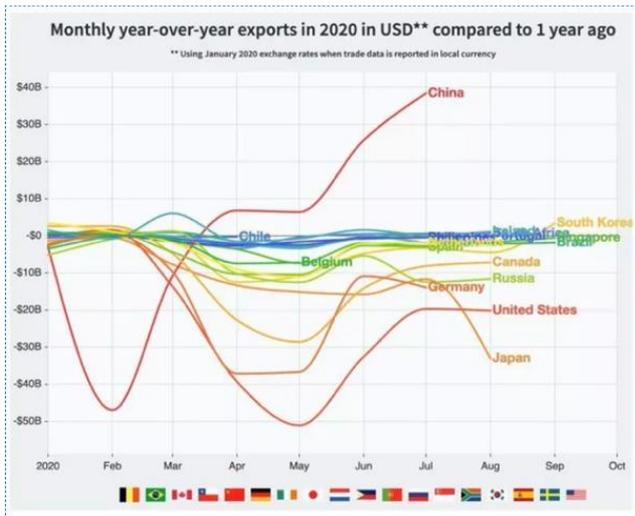
Figure 1. **An unprecedented output collapse is occurring in the first half of 2020**
 Projected change in GDP at constant prices between 2019Q4 and 2020Q2 (per cent)



Note: Data for China refer to the change in output between 2019Q4 and 2020Q1.

Source: OECD Economic Outlook 107 database.

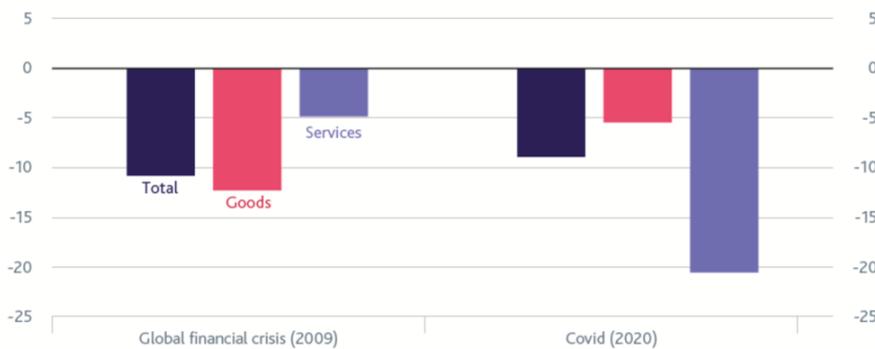
Due to domestic obstacles to production, such as the shutting down of factories, insufficient resources, and lack of labor, exports dropped significantly overall. China was able to recover shortly beginning in March, but other nations remained in decline until much later in the year.⁷



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Generally speaking, despite the steep 8.9% drop in world trade, a large majority of the crisis was centralized around the service industry, as compared to the pandemic’s effects on goods trade.⁸ According to the IMF World Economic Outlook, the annual growth rate in percentage for service trade showed a sharp 20% decrease. This is largely due to COVID-related restrictions of social distancing, which meant no gathering, traveling, eating out, or basically coming in contact with a majority of the service industry. It was essentially much more difficult for service trade to recover, as the waves of infection fluctuate with discovery and diffusion of new variants.

Chart A: Services trade has fallen more sharply than goods trade
Annual growth rates (%)



Sources: IMF World Economic Outlook April 2021 and Bank calculations. Data show global trade volumes.

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As delineated by the World Bank Group of Macroeconomics, Trade, and Investment, data from May of 2020 proved that 27 countries, mostly focused in Southeast Asia, East Europe, and northern African, implemented “a total of 38 exports controls on food since the outbreak of the pandemic.”⁸ As for export controls in medical supplies and medicine (items crucial to health responses of pandemic), a total of 156 have been executed by more than 85 countries.⁸ Reports from the WTO presented that G20 economies have administered as many as 140 policies and measures dealing with trade. Of these, 72% was of trade-facilitating, or free trade nature, while the other 28% showed to be of trade-restrictive, or protectionist nature.⁹ Of the trade facilitating policies, a vast majority regarded the “elimination of import tariffs and import taxes”, mostly around pandemic related items like “PPE, sanitizers, disinfectants, medical equipment, and medicine/drugs.”⁹ On the other hand, 90% of trade-restrictive policies applied to export bans,

as illustrated in detail above. Overall, the visible trend during the early stages of the pandemic was to encourage the free flow of products pertaining to COVID, and the curtail of products that were not.

For normal durable goods unrelated to the medical and sanitary needs of the pandemic, G20 economies allegedly enforced 35 trade-facilitating measures along with 26 trade-restrictive measures. The trade coverage for the according facilitating measures on import exceeded that of the trade coverage for restrictive measures.⁹

For developing countries, import protectionism of medical products continue to pose a burden on social welfare. Countries' application of tariffs on imports of medical masks and protective clothing are essentially "taxing their own health systems."¹⁰ Export restrictions, respectively, are intended to "offset domestic shortages", but backfires to result in shortage of global supply and even higher prices.¹⁰

1.2 Recent Developments

Since early 2021, the development and distribution of vaccination (albeit with their varying effectiveness) to the public have caused trade regulations implemented during the pandemic to gradually loosen up. Information gathered by the WTO Secretariat indicated that of the measures executed by G20 countries, 22% of trade-facilitating measures have been terminated. The same goes for 49% of trade-restrictive measures.⁹ However, the production and distribution of vaccines has not yet reached an equitable state globally. Low-income developing countries have much lower vaccination rates despite having large population sizes. Considering the case of developing countries, protectionism is still in persistence, but have been suspended temporarily in certain scenarios. Pakistan has made a move to exempt tax and import duty for medical products; Brazil, comparably, "eliminated tariffs on hospital products."¹⁰ The reality of the world right now is that such a balance between free trade and protectionism must be discovered within an unsynchronized recovery of economies.

Following the discovery and the immediate widespread of the **Omicron** variant in November 2021, many countries instantly moved back into lockdown. Before this, world trade for Q3 of 2021 had met its recorded highest since the beginning of the pandemic.²⁴ Yet this strong recovery was at risk with the introduction of a new variant. South Africa, the United States, countries of the EU and across the Pacific have "[established] strict rules for travelers that may have been exposed to the Omicron."²⁴ For countries that have a near zero tolerance for COVID, such as China, the reaction was even more conspicuous. China announced the shutting down of one of its busiest ports after just one worker tested positive.²⁴

Despite the initial distress, many countries are seeing the possibility of reopening borders and

trade. As of December 2021, vaccination companies have claimed the addition of a third dose of vaccine would prove effective for the Omicron variant.²⁵ The United States is taking the lead as it actively considers reopening, as quoted by the Bank of America: “we think the odds are still very much in favor of the pandemic phase winding down. In our view, COVID is here to stay, but a shift to an endemic phase is approaching where infections are common but severe lockdowns and travel restrictions are not”.²⁵ The same trend is visible in EU countries as well, as many governments see a hopeful rebound in markets following the relief of Omicron anxiety.²⁶

Key Terms

Free Trade – “a trading system that encourages the free flow of goods, fair competition, transparency, predictability, and the alleviation of discrimination between countries that form trade agreements.”¹

Protectionism – “government-imposed trade policy by which countries attempt to protect their industries and workers from foreign competition. Protectionism is commonly implemented by the imposition of tariffs, quotas on imports and exports, product standards, and government subsidies.”²¹

Dumping – “when imported goods have a significantly lower price in foreign markets than its price in the country of origin.”⁴

Trade Facilitation – “a specific set of measures that streamline and simplify the technical and legal procedures for products entering or leaving a country.”²²

Trade Restriction – “barriers that make the flow of goods and services between countries immobile.”²³

*Note: trade facilitation and trade restriction are similes to free trade and protectionism, but the terms are used interchangeably, hence each is defined separately. *

2. Emphasis of the Discourse

2.1 Right Wing Approach

Although there is a generally accepted picture of a countries’ political standing, it must be taken in consideration that many governmental decisions deviate from their political party beliefs accordingly, and that countries usually consists of both ideologies. This is especially the case when it comes to trade, international relations, and economic interest during a crisis.

The conservative economic approach to trade is to put personal benefits above others. Right-wing powers often consider economic nationalism, or protectionism, when dealing with the extents of

international trade.¹¹ Border security in trade constructed inward policies that safeguard domestic industries, while slowing building influence globally. In the past, the world operated predominantly under liberal countries that had opt for free trade; but in the recent years, countries with more conservative ideologies begun challenging the liberal economic climate.¹¹ Revisionist powers, like China, have gradually become able to threaten the United States, in terms of tariffs in existing import-and-export partnerships, eventually leading to the infamous, and still ongoing trade war between the two.

In the COVID-19 scenario, most countries have taken similar protectionist approaches in response to such an unprecedented crisis. China, a traditionally right-wing nation, took the lead to many strategic decisions when it comes to trade. Being the first to undergo such a devastation in the economy, China was also the first to gradually relax its restrictions on trade, specifically their exports, with the reopening of domestic supply chains.¹⁴ Currently, China is following the path of “keeping what is needed” and “trading what is not”.¹³ This method of recovery, of course, proves only applicable to the economic strength of China, but similar approaches can be taken by other countries.

Correspondingly, East European countries such as Poland, known to be more lenient towards the rightist approach, have seen economic trends which resembled that of China’s to a certain extent during the pandemic. Compared to a handful of other countries, Poland faced a much milder economic recession, with a projected decline of only 7.9% in GDP during the second half of 2020.²⁷ Markus Heinz, the World Bank representative for Poland has further stated that “the Polish economy was strong when the COVID-19 pandemic hit. Many years of uninterrupted growth, prudent macroeconomic policies, access to EU funds and social programs have helped cushion the effects of the crisis and limit the negative consequences.”²⁸ It is clear that with the easing of pandemic-related policies, regarding both lockdowns and trade restrictions, Poland is hopeful in seeing a moderate, and comparatively swift economic recovery.

2.2 Left Wing Approach

Initially, liberalistic ideologies advocated for individual freedom, deregulation policies, and most importantly, free trade. Free trade policies allowed for minimal barriers to the flow of goods internationally, which served as a foundation for globalization and socio-economic development.¹¹ In a sense, countries that took a more liberal approach entrenched for outward-oriented policies. However, since the global financial crisis in 2009, increasing levels of protectionist policies have been adopted, even by traditionally left-wing countries in the race of global power struggle.¹² Entering an era of neo protectionism, there is a visible departure from democratic and liberal economic norms in the international agenda. Examples include the United Kingdom leaving the EU as well as the implementation of strict foreign limitations on trade from

the United States.¹²

As mentioned before, many of the immediate reactions to the humanitarian and economic crisis of COVID-19 turned to protectionist tendencies. This trend persisted even within the traditionally liberal EU, with power suppliers like France, Germany, and the Czech Republic imposing protectionist, export-limiting policies on medical products. Reasons behind the establishment of these measures remain relevant, for national governments must put the safety of their own citizens before others. Nevertheless, severe impacts resulted from these regulations. Not only were counterpart countries like Spain and Italy unable to adequately battle the crisis due to insufficient resources, but these EU producers risk losing the access to imports outside the EU once their export controls retaliate.¹³

2.3 Stance of Intergovernmental Organizations

Since the beginning of the pandemic, intergovernmental organizations have been working to monitor the economic climate worldwide. The **World Trade Organization (WTO)**, consisting of 164 members, creates a safe arena for members to negotiate, establish, and regulate trade agreements across member states.¹⁶ WTO advocates for no discrimination, opened trade, predictability, fair competition, inclusion, support for less developed countries, partnerships, and protection of the environment.¹⁵ Measurably, the organization exists to promote the idea of free trade amongst nations, prompting economic development. In such a case, WTO reports to have seen a seemingly “destructive acceleration of protectionism”⁹ resulting from the pandemic. Not only did the organization categorize the overwhelming number of protectionist measures as something that would “further hurt the world economy,” but the Director General has purposely illustrated: “trade recovery will not be sustainable unless vaccine equity is ensured.”⁹ Moreover, a report covering WTO data from October 2020 to October 2021 revealed that accumulated restrictive measures on world trade, beginning from 2009 and enhanced by the pandemic, have affected trade merchandise estimated to be worth 1.5 trillion USD.¹⁷ Overall, the WTO is in favor of reopening borders and alleviating protectionism.

The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) is an international organization with 38 member countries that works to improve economic and social wellbeing of developed nations. With the objective of #betterlives, the group strives to build policies that improves economy and world trade.¹⁸ The OECD has similar motives to that of the WTO in terms of tackling the trade environment amidst a pandemic. In a report published in June of 2020, the OECD illustrated according issues and actions for international trade during COVID-19. It believed in boosting trade by improving transparency, as well as avoiding unnecessary trade restrictions.⁶ Essentially, the OECD believes that trade is essential to all and every country, and

the free flow of goods must be ensured through recovery processes.

2.4 Stance of Developed Countries

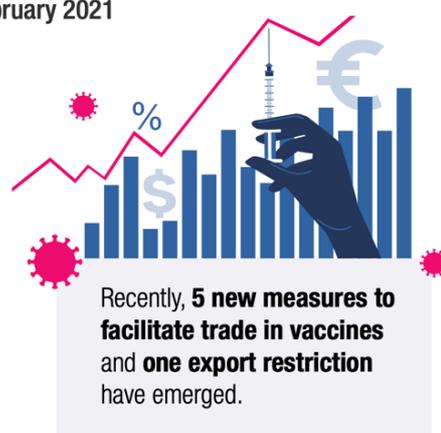
Although all countries were troubled by the pandemic and economic decline, developed countries saw greater falls in imports and exports due to such a large difference from conditions pre-pandemic. Based on data of trade recovery rates in 2020, developed countries went from a 5% decline in import and a 9% decline in exports, to a 1% increase in imports and a 1% decline in imports.¹⁸ Time is a factor that needs to be taken into consideration, as waves of infection hit different regions of the world at different months of the year. Developed economies of East Asia, especially China, showed phenomenal recovery in the latter half of 2020. Other economies, like those of the United States and the EU, displayed a more delayed process.

By 2021, most developed countries have begun to repeal established trade measures, whether they be of trade-facilitating or trade restricting nature. As seen in the figure below, very few of the existing regulations belong to developed nations.¹⁸

> Figure 4. Pandemic-related trade measures, as at 1 February 2021



Source: [COVID-19 and non-tariff measures, UNCTAD](#).



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That being said, the major problem with developed countries is its reliance on the service sector. As a country's economy transitions from secondary to tertiary, service becomes the center of its economic activity. In context, the vulnerability of developed economies during a pandemic will grow as service trade face significantly drops. The composition of a country's trading affairs (whether it is of service, goods, or technology) must be factored in when approaching the topic of this debate.

2.5 Stance of Developing Countries

In terms of humanitarian and health crisis, developing countries are sure to experience impacts of the pandemic with more severity. Developing nations are initially less experienced in production of COVID-related products, and with the world being almost entirely in lockdown, many find

themselves in fatal condition. Along with an ongoing health crisis, many LEDCs face significant economic turmoil brought by collapse in commodity prices and restrictions imposed by themselves and other economies. Protectionist policies have especially affected export-dependent countries, such as Bangladesh, Cambodia, Nepal, Gambia, Lesotho, and Haiti. More than 50% of export revenue of the six nations listed come from export of manufactured goods, like clothing and apparel.¹⁹ Because such a great number of developing countries are commodity dependent in their exports, meaning that they rely on one type of resource or product, any global shocks in demand will cause their economies to shatter. On top of this, collapse in tourism, which acts as a crucial source of income for many island states, as well as reduced foreign direct investment brought more than 90 developing countries to approach the International Monetary Fund.²⁰

3. Possible Solutions

3.1 In Favor of Developed Countries

Governments of developed countries have better internal supply systems. In order to resume economic practices as closely to pre-pandemic state as possible, developed countries should be working towards the facilitation of open trade. Although an immediate, fully executed international free trade is not plausible or ideal, it is important for developed countries to consider improving overall transparency and keep trade flowing.⁶ Any further establishment or elimination of trade policies must be visible and accessible by all parties. Active communication, which could be done through intergovernmental organizations, is vital to building unanimous knowledge of market developments and changes in commodity chains worldwide.

It would be in the benefit of all developed nations if each country avoided arbitrary restrictions on exports or controlling the domestic consumption of essential goods.⁸ Instead, communication with neighboring countries to negotiate containment measures of the virus is encouraged. The goal is to allow as much commerce to happen as possible.

The maxim still stands for countries to hold on to what is needed, and trade what is not.¹³

3.2 In Favor of Developing Countries

To mitigate further impacts on the economy caused by the pandemic, it is important that developing countries approach their protectionist policies with more caution. Although certain restrictions may offset domestic shortages, results may be of the multiplier effect, aggravating the original supply shocks and causing more economic dilemmas to arise.¹⁰ Generally, the direction of trade policies for developing countries should also resemble the preservation of opened markets. If protectionism is still needed, policies that are inefficient and will only put a burden on

the system should be suspended.

Many LEDCs have called for immediate measures of international support from the UN to help cope with issues caused by the pandemic. Some of the key points of this call to action include “a full debt cancellation for LEDCs in need, lifting trade barriers and scaling up aid for trade, as well as protect migrants of LEDCs and promote their remittances.”¹⁹ Since exports play such a large role in many developing countries, exporters should be supported. With loosened borders from all nations, products would be able to enter places where they are desired and developing countries would be relieved from strain caused by restricted merchandise exports.

4. Keep in Mind the Following

Consider the debate within how uniquely each country values health, security, and economy. When researching your country’s stance, take into account whether or not your country truly needs protectionist policies, weigh the costs and benefits of ones that have already been established, and lastly, look into your country’s position in the global market.

The following questions are for delegates to consider when researching.

1. In situations of scarcity, is protectionism necessarily bad?
2. What is the true nature of the international market? Is a point where every country is simultaneously achieving a balance between free trade and protectionism really attainable?
3. Amidst an unprecedented global pandemic, to what extent should trade be given up for the safety of citizens? What has your country done to display their priorities in this context?
4. In case of a crisis, are protectionist policies really protecting the economy, or are they actions of self-inflicting harm?
5. If your country seemed to have already found this equilibrium, is your path a plausible route for other countries to emulate?
6. What is the role of self-interest during a pandemic? Is it the driving force of all decisions made by governments?

5. Evaluation

The continuous widespread the COVID-19 pandemic has left a catastrophic imprint on global economy and its trading environment. The imprint was so impactful that the world is still struggling to reach stability till this day. The overwhelming lenience towards protectionism across numerous countries seemed to have solved problems on a small scale, but eventually more

substantial ones were created. Countries must juggle the responsibility to maintain the health of populations and the socio-economic welfare of society as a whole.

Trade is the driving force, the basic roots to the livelihood of economy, and more importantly, the livelihood of the individuals who are part of the economy. Solving a global crisis is not easy, especially when it comes to settling an ongoing issue about politics, economics, and above all, people. Think outside the box, provide inspiring, insightful, yet compelling ideas, and save the world from economic collapse. Good luck.

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