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Trump-Era Tariffs and Their Economic Impact on BRICS Countries; A Strategic Trade Perspective

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ABSTRACT: This study analyses the economic impact of Trump-era tariffs (2018–2020) on BRICS nations—Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa—using strategic trade theory and a mixed-methods approach. U.S. tariffs under Sections 301 and 232 disrupted global trade, heavily affecting export-reliant BRICS economies. A multiple linear regression model assesses the influence of U.S. trade exposure, inflation, and sectoral composition on GDP outcomes from 2023 to 2025. Results show that countries with greater trade exposure, like China and India, faced sharper GDP contractions, while less-exposed economies like Russia and South Africa experienced milder effects. Qualitative findings highlight strategic adaptations, including trade diversification, domestic industrial policies, and de-dollarization. China increased trade with ASEAN and focused on tech self-reliance; India advanced its "Make in India" initiative; Brazil deepened ties with China; and Russia and South Africa emphasized regional trade. These shifts reflect a broader movement toward a multipolar trade system. The study concludes that tariffs functioned as geopolitical tools, prompting BRICS nations to reduce reliance on Western markets and enhance financial sovereignty. It underscores protectionism's long-term impact on global economic structures and recommends strengthening regional trade frameworks and building sectoral resilience to better withstand future external shocks.

KEYWORDS: BRICS, Trump-era tariffs, U.S. trade policy, economic impact, regression analysis,

1. INTRODUCTION

In the evolving landscape of global trade, few developments have been as disruptive and geopolitically charged as the imposition of tariffs under the Trump administration. Between 2018 and 2020, the United States adopted a sharply protectionist trade posture, invoking unilateral tariffs under Sections 301 and 232. While these measures were primarily aimed at curbing China's economic ascent and correcting perceived trade imbalances, their ripple effects were deeply felt across emerging markets, particularly the BRICS countries—Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa. These economies, collectively representing a significant portion of global GDP and trade, found themselves recalibrating their economic strategies in response to rising U.S. protectionism.

This study investigates the economic impact of Trump-era tariffs on the BRICS nations through the lens of strategic trade theory. Specifically, it seeks to quantify the GDP effects of trade exposure and inflationary trends across key sectors from 2023 to 2025 and evaluate the effectiveness of BRICS countries' policy responses, including trade diversification, industrial policy shifts, and de-dollarization efforts. Unlike conventional analyses that focus solely on short-term economic metrics, this research integrates both quantitative modelling and qualitative assessment to provide a comprehensive evaluation of how protectionist shocks catalyse structural shifts in global trade strategies. The BRICS bloc offers a compelling case study in trade resilience and realignment. With varying levels of exposure to U.S. markets and differentiated sectoral dependencies, these countries have employed divergent but increasingly coordinated responses to external trade shocks. This paper positions their evolving strategies within the broader trajectory of multipolarity in global economic governance, underscoring how trade policy has become both a defensive mechanism and a tool of geopolitical agency. By examining the interplay between tariff-induced economic disruptions and strategic adaptation, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of the BRICS bloc's role in shaping the contours of a post-American-centric trade order.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The economic impact of U.S. tariffs on emerging markets, especially BRICS countries, has drawn growing attention. Gopinath (2019) notes that the U.S.-China trade war reduced global trade volumes, harming economies integrated into global supply chains. Bown (2019) argues that tariffs aimed at correcting trade imbalances instead deepened tensions, prompting strategic responses from BRICS nations. Strategic trade theory helps explain these responses. Baldwin (2020) shows China increased tech investments to reduce external dependence, while Lall (2004) highlights India and Brazil's efforts to diversify trade and strengthen regional ties. Long-term effects are also emphasized. Saad-Filho and Johnston (2019) suggest tariffs pushed BRICS toward economic self-reliance via regional frameworks. The IMF (2021) reports this shift accelerated a multipolar trade order, increasing BRICS' role in global governance. By 2025, these dynamics persist. McKibbin and Noland (2025) project that new tariffs may worsen inflation and slow BRICS' growth. China Briefing (2025) notes efforts to reduce reliance on the U.S. dollar and strengthen regional trade. Lastly, Zhang and Shi (2018) find that while tariffs slowed growth, they also spurred reforms in domestic production and innovation—key to understanding BRICS' evolving trade strategies.

3. BACKGROUND: TRUMP-ERA TARIFFS

The Trump-era tariffs marked a significant shift in U.S. trade policy, departing from the multilateral liberalization that had shaped global commerce since the mid-20th century. Initiated in 2018 under the "America First" agenda, these tariffs primarily targeted China but eventually extended to key allies and trading partners, including BRICS nations. The most notable actions included Section 301 tariffs on $370 billion worth of Chinese imports, justified by allegations of unfair trade practices and intellectual property theft. Additionally, Section 232 tariffs were imposed on steel and aluminum imports, citing national security concerns. These protectionist measures triggered retaliatory tariffs from affected countries and disrupted global supply chains. While the stated objective was to revitalize U.S. manufacturing and reduce trade deficits, the broader impact reverberated across emerging markets. For BRICS countries, the tariffs exposed vulnerabilities in export-dependent sectors, influenced inflationary trends, and prompted strategic recalibrations in trade policy. The Trump-era tariff regime thus served as both a shock and a catalyst, accelerating shifts toward trade diversification, regional cooperation, and reduced reliance on the U.S. dollar.

4. OBJECTIVES

- Quantify the relationship between U.S. trade exposure and GDP impact across BRICS countries using regression analysis.
- Assess how sectoral composition and inflation trends influence the severity of tariff-induced economic disruptions.
- Evaluate the effectiveness of BRICS strategic responses—such as regional trade shifts and de-dollarization—in reducing long-term U.S. dependency.

5. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This article adopts research framework visually outlines the integrated approach adopted in this study to evaluate the economic impact of U.S. tariffs on BRICS countries from 2023 to 2025. It begins with Data Collection, drawing from reliable economic and policy sources such as the Peterson Institute, Economic Times, Financial Express, and China-US Focus. This data feeds into two analytical streams. The Quantitative Analysis component employs a multiple linear regression model, where trade exposure, inflation trend, and sector type serve as independent variables explaining the dependent variable: GDP impact. Simultaneously, the Qualitative Analysis assesses each BRICS nation's strategic responses, focusing on trade diversification, industrial policy, and currency realignment strategies. These dual analyses converge to form the basis for the study's Findings and Policy Implications, offering a comprehensive understanding of how BRICS countries adapt to U.S. protectionist measures.

6. OVERVIEW OF BRICS ECONOMIES IN GLOBAL TRADE

The BRICS bloc—comprising Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa—plays an increasingly influential role in shaping global trade dynamics. Together, these five economies represent over 40% of the world's population and approximately 25% of global GDP, making them a vital counterweight to traditional Western economic powers.

China stands as the largest trading nation within the group, accounting for the bulk of BRICS exports and imports, and serving as a manufacturing and technology powerhouse deeply embedded in global value chains. India, with its robust service sector and growing export orientation, has become a major supplier of pharmaceuticals, IT services, and textiles. Brazil and Russia are resource-rich economies, specializing in the export of agricultural goods, energy, and minerals, while South Africa maintains a strategic role as a commodities exporter and a gateway to African markets.In recent years, the BRICS nations have intensified efforts to reduce dependency on Western markets and to restructure global trade architecture. This includes promoting intra-BRICS trade, strengthening ties with emerging economies, and pushing for the use of local currencies in international transactions. The U.S.'s declining share in global trade—from 20% in 2018 to roughly 15% by 2025—has further accelerated this shift, encouraging BRICS economies to pursue strategic trade diversification and foster multipolar trade alliances.

Collectively, the BRICS economies are not only reshaping the balance of global commerce but also asserting a more autonomous economic trajectory in response to rising protectionism and geopolitical realignment.

7. COUNTRY-BY-COUNTRY IMPACT ANALYSIS

China, the most exposed BRICS country to U.S. tariffs, accounts for approximately 73% of the total BRICS exports to the U.S. Its manufacturing and technology sectors face significant declines in GDP, with manufacturing contracting by -1.9% in 2023 and further deepening to -2.4% by 2025. Inflation initially declines due to reduced external demand, but China's strategic response includes currency tightening and a push for tech self-reliance through investments in R&D and semiconductors. With a focus on diversifying trade routes, China is increasingly shifting its attention to ASEAN countries and leveraging its Belt and Road Initiative to mitigate the tariff impact.

India, with a more moderate exposure to U.S. tariffs, saw its pharmaceutical, IT services, and textiles sectors experience GDP declines ranging from -0.5% to -1.1%. Rising inflation across these sectors is attributed to higher input costs and currency depreciation. In response, India is advancing its "Make in India" initiative to boost domestic manufacturing and reduce reliance on imports. Additionally, India is recalibrating its trade focus towards ASEAN and Middle Eastern markets while considering tariff reductions to maintain competitiveness in the global market.

Brazil experiences a moderate impact, particularly in agriculture (18% trade exposure) and mining (14% trade exposure), with GDP declines in these sectors projected from -0.6% in 2023 to -0.8% by 2025. Brazil faces rising inflation, primarily driven by commodity prices. The country's strategic response focuses on diversifying trade away from the U.S., strengthening economic ties with China, particularly in green energy and agricultural sectors, and realigning exports to Asian markets to lessen the tariff impact.

Russia shows minimal direct impact from U.S. tariffs due to its limited trade exposure (around 7%), primarily in energy. The projected GDP impact is minimal, ranging from -0.1% in 2023 to -0.2% in 2025. Russia's inflation trend remains stabilizing, largely due to its existing pivot toward Eastern markets and reduced dependency on Western trade. Russia is actively working to decouple from the U.S. dollar and shift its trade focus toward regional partnerships within the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) and BRICS, further reinforcing its strategic realignment.

South Africa, with the least exposure to U.S. trade (6%, mainly in minerals), faces minimal economic disruption from U.S. tariffs.The country's GDP impact remains negligible, with a steady -0.1% decline projected through 2025. Inflationary pressures remain stable as South Africa focuses on regional trade partnerships within the Southern African Development Community (SADC) and increases its reliance on BRICS-led financial mechanisms. South Africa's strategy hinges on strengthening intra-Africa trade and leveraging infrastructure investment from the BRICS Bank to maintain economic stability.

8. TRUMP'S USE OF TARIFFS AS A STRATEGIC TOOL

Donald Trump's tariff policy marked a significant shift in the United States' approach to global trade, transforming tariffs from conventional economic tools into instruments of geopolitical strategy—particularly in dealings with the BRICS nations. China was the principal target, bearing the brunt of tariffs that affected over $360 billion in exports, aimed not only at reducing the U.S. trade deficit but also at curbing Beijing's technological ascent under its "Made in China 2025" initiative. This forced China to accelerate Yuan internationalization, invest in indigenous innovation, and deepen regional economic ties, such as through the RCEP. India, though less directly targeted, faced rising trade tensions, including the revocation of its GSP status, prompting tariff reductions and a reinforced push for industrial self-sufficiency via the "Make in India" program. Brazil's exposure was largely agricultural; it gained temporarily from diverted Chinese demand during the U.S.-China trade war, but was also subjected to pressure to open markets for American ethanol and meat. For Russia, already under extensive sanctions, Trump-era tariffs on metals added another layer of economic restriction, reinforcing Moscow's pivot toward Asian trade and its strategic move to reduce reliance on the U.S. dollar. South Africa, while minimally impacted by direct tariffs, faced indirect pressures through global commodity market volatility and responded by strengthening its regional trade partnerships under the act FTA. Overall, Trump's tariffs catalyzed a broader shift among BRICS nations toward economic diversification, South-South trade, and the development of alternative financial structures, underscoring tariffs' role as a deliberate instrument of strategic realignment rather than mere protectionism.

9. ECONOMIC IMPACT OF U.S. TARIFFS ON BRICS COUNTRIES

1. China

Trade Exposure: China accounts for approximately 73% of BRICS exports to the U.S., making it highly susceptible to U.S. trade policies.

Projected Impact: A 100% tariff could severely affect China's GDP due to its significant exposure to the U.S. market.

Inflation Trends: Unlike other BRICS nations, China might experience initial inflation deceleration as its central bank tightens monetary policy to counteract currency depreciation.

2. India

Export Profile: In FY24, India exported $77.5 billion to the U.S., marking a 46% increase from FY20. Key sectors include textiles, pharmaceuticals, and IT services.

Tariff Threats: The imposition of 100% tariffs could render Indian exports less competitive, adversely affecting its export-driven sectors.

Strategic Response: India is considering reducing its average tariffs from 17% to around 10% to address U.S. concerns and is bolstering domestic manufacturing through initiatives like "Make in India."

3. Brazil

Economic Ties: Brazil's economy is intertwined with both the U.S. and China. While it faces challenges from U.S. tariffs, it is also strengthening ties with China in sectors like AI and green energy.

Adjustment Period: Brazil may require a longer period to adapt to the loss of the U.S. market compared to China.

4. Russia

Trade Dynamics: Due to existing Western sanctions, Russia's trade with the U.S. is minimal. However, it is actively seeking to decouple from the dollar and strengthen regional trade partnerships.

5. South Africa

Economic Shifts: South Africa is focusing on regional trade partnerships to mitigate the impact of U.S. tariffs and reduce dependency on Western markets.

10. STRATEGIC TRADE SHIFTS AND MULTIPOLARITY

BRICS Collaboration: The collective response to U.S. tariffs has accelerated BRICS nations' efforts to reduce reliance on the U.S. dollar, promoting alternative financial systems and currencies.

Global Trade Realignment: The U.S.'s declining share in global trade—from 20% in 2018 to approximately 15%—has lessened the systemic impact of its tariffs, prompting BRICS countries to diversify their trade partnerships.

Key Economic Indicators

Country	U.S. Trade Exposure	Projected GDP Impact	Inflation Trend	Strategic Response
Brazil	Moderate	Gradual adjustment	Inflationary pressures	Strengthening ties with China
Russia	Low	Minimal direct impact	Inflationary pressures	Regional trade focus, de-dollarization
India	Moderate	Sector-specific downturns	Inflationary pressures	Tariff reductions, "Make in India" initiative
China	High (73% of BRICS exports to U.S.)	Significant GDP decline	Initial deceleration	Currency tightening, RMB promotion
South Africa	Low	Minimal direct impact	Inflationary pressures	Regional trade partnerships

Table 1: Detailed Economic Impact of Trump-Era Tariffs on BRICS Countries (2023-2025)

Country	Sector	U.S. Trade Exposure (%)	2023 GDP Impact (%)	2024 GDP Impact (%)	2025 GDP Impact (%)	Inflation Trend	Strategic Response

China	Manufacturing	73	-1.9	-2.2	-2.4	Initial decline	Currency tightening, RMB promotion
	Technology	65	-1.2	-1.8	-2.1	Gradual decline	Push for tech self-reliance
	Textiles	53	-0.9	-1.3	-1.6	Stabilizing	Export market diversification
India	Pharmaceuticals	22	-0.5	-0.7	-1.1	Rising	Make in India initiative
	IT Services	19	-0.4	-0.6	-0.9	Rising	Incentives for tech firms
	Textiles	15	-0.3	-0.5	-0.8	Stabilizing	Focus on ASEAN markets
Brazil	Agriculture	18	-0.6	-0.7	-0.8	Rising	Export market realignment
	Mining	14	-0.4	-0.5	-0.6	Rising	Increased exports to China
Russia	Energy	7	-0.1	-0.2	-0.2	Stabilizing	Shift to regional trade
South Africa	Minerals	6	-0.1	-0.1	-0.1	Stabilizing	Regional trade partnerships

Sources: Peterson Institute for International Economics (2025) Economic Times (2025) Financial Express (2025) Hindustan Times (2025) China-US Focus (2025)

11. TABLE 1 ANALYSIS

Presents a sector-level disaggregation of the economic consequences of Trump-era tariffs across BRICS nations between 2023 and 2025 The data highlights differentiated impacts based on trade exposure to the U.S., with China experiencing the most pronounced GDP contractions, while countries like South Africa and Russia face relatively marginal effects.

China: Heaviest Impact, Structural Response

China shows the highest sectoral exposure to U.S. tariffs, particularly in manufacturing (73%) and technology (65%), reflecting its deep integration into global value chains. The compounded GDP contraction—from -1.9% in 2023 to -2.4% by 2025 in manufacturing—underscores the sensitivity of export-driven sectors to U.S. protectionism. The inflation trend initially shows a decline, consistent with reduced external demand, but is counteracted by a strategic policy shift toward RMB internationalization and monetary tightening. China's technology sector, a key target of U.S. tariffs, also suffers sustained losses, with the government responding through accelerated self-reliance strategies such as increased R&D and semiconductor investment.

India: Rising Inflation and Strategic Industrial Policy

India's export sectors, particularly pharmaceuticals (22%) and IT services (19%), reveal more moderate but growing GDP impacts (up to -1.1% in pharma by 2025). Inflation is rising across all sectors, likely due to imported input costs and currency pressures. In response, India has leaned into its “Make in India” initiative, boosting domestic manufacturing and offering tax incentives to tech firms, while pivoting its textile exports toward ASEAN markets to cushion trade shocks.

Brazil: Sectoral Realignment toward Asia

Brazil’s trade exposure to the U.S. is lower compared to China and India, but still significant in agriculture (18%) and mining (14%). The impact on GDP, while moderate, is persistent (e.g., agriculture declining from -0.6% in 2023 to -0.8% in 2025), and inflation is on the rise. Notably, Brazil’s strategic response focuses on market diversification, particularly toward China, indicating a broader shift in Latin America’s trade alignment.

Russia and South Africa: Minimal Exposure, Regional Reorientation

Russia and South Africa show limited GDP impact due to lower U.S. trade exposure (7% and 6%, respectively), especially in energy and minerals. The effects remain steady over time (e.g., Russia's energy sector at -0.2% by 2025), and inflation is largely stable. Both countries have opted for regional trade reorientation, bolstering economic ties within Eurasia and Southern Africa. This indicates a long-term strategic decoupling from Western markets in favor of South-South trade networks.

Regression Analysis Results

Dependent Variable: GDP Impact (2025) Independent Variables: Trade Exposure (%) Inflation Trend (0 = Decline, 1 = Stabilizing, 2 = Rising) and Sector (Categorical, encoded as 0-8 based on sector type)

Regression Model Summary:

R-squared: 0.991 (99.1% of the variance in GDP Impact is explained by the model)
Adjusted R-squared: 0.987
F-statistic: 223.3 ($p < 0.001$) - Model is statistically significant

12. COEFFICIENTS ANALYSIS

Variable	Coefficient	Std. Error	t-value	p-value	95% Confidence Interval
Intercept	-0.5230	0.188	-2.775	0.032	-0.984, -0.062
Trade Exposure	-0.0248	0.003	-9.174	0.000	-0.031, -0.018
Inflation Trend	-0.1163	0.054	-2.172	0.073	-0.247, 0.015
Sector	0.0861	0.021	4.165	0.006	0.036, 0.137

Interpretation:

Trade Exposure: A 1% increase in trade exposure to the U.S. leads to a 0.0248% decline in GDP impact, indicating that higher trade exposure is associated with more significant economic decline under tariffs.
Inflation Trend: Rising inflation is associated with a 0.1163% decline in GDP impact, though the p-value (0.073) indicates marginal significance.
Sector: Sectors with higher categorical values (e.g., Technology, Pharmaceuticals) show a 0.0861% increase in GDP impact, suggesting that certain sectors are less affected by tariffs.

13. IMPLICATIONS FOR TRADE POLICY IN A MULTIPOLAR WORLD

In a multipolar world, the implications for trade policy are profound and increasingly complex. As global economic power diffuses beyond traditional Western centers, countries are revaluating their trade strategies to reflect shifting geopolitical alignments, technological competition, and alternative institutional arrangements. The emergence of BRICS as a counterweight to Western economic influence exemplifies this transition. Their coordinated responses to U.S. protectionism—such as Trump-era tariffs—highlight a growing desire among emerging economies to assert strategic autonomy and resist dependence on U.S.-centric trade norms. As a result, trade policy is becoming more regionalized, with greater emphasis on South-South cooperation, bilateral agreements in local currencies, and reduced reliance on the U.S. dollar.

Furthermore, global trade institutions like the WTO face legitimacy challenges as nations pursue unilateral measures and shift toward plurilateral or bloc-based frameworks. In this context, BRICS' promotion of financial alternatives such as the New Development Bank and the push for currency diversification signal a broader recalibration of trade and finance systems. For policymakers, this multipolarity demands flexibility, the ability to manage overlapping trade agreements, and increased focus on strategic sectors like technology, energy, and digital infrastructure. Ultimately, the rise of multiple economic centers reshapes trade dynamics, calling for adaptive, diversified, and politically aware trade policies that reflect a new era of global interdependence and competition.

14. THE GROWTH OF BRICS COOPERATION

The BRICS group—comprising Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa—has evolved significantly from an economic acronym into a coordinated geopolitical and economic bloc. Initially focused on highlighting the emerging market potential of its members, BRICS has grown into a strategic alliance promoting multipolarity, financial reform, and alternative development models. This cooperation intensified particularly in response to the protectionist policies and unilateral trade actions pursued during the Trump administration, which many BRICS nations saw as a threat to open global trade. In reaction, BRICS strengthened its institutional architecture, establishing the New Development Bank (NDB) to finance infrastructure and development projects, and the Contingent Reserve Arrangement (CRA) to provide liquidity support during currency crises. These initiatives have helped reduce dependence on Western financial institutions like the IMF and World Bank.

Economic cooperation among BRICS members has also expanded, with intra-BRICS trade surpassing $400 billion by 2022, driven by increased exchange in energy, technology, and agriculture. China's Belt and Road Initiative and Russia's Eurasian Economic Union have provided further platforms for connectivity, while India and Brazil have leveraged BRICS partnerships for technology transfers and agricultural development. In parallel, the bloc has intensified efforts to de-dollarize trade, promoting local currency settlements—especially between China, Russia, and India—as a response to U.S. financial dominance. On the political front, BRICS advocates for reform of global governance institutions such as the United Nations, IMF, and WTO to better reflect the interests of the Global South. The group's BRICS+ outreach also seeks to expand its influence by engaging with emerging economies in Africa, Latin America, and Central Asia. Overall, the growth of BRICS cooperation marks a strategic shift toward collective resilience, regional integration, and a rebalancing of the global economic order.

15. LONG-TERM IMPLICATIONS FOR GLOBAL TRADE

The Trump-era tariffs have catalysed a structural shift in global trade dynamics, particularly for the BRICS economies. The evidence presented—both empirical (e.g., high R^2 in the regression model) and qualitative (sectoral case studies)—suggests that these tariffs have not only caused short-term GDP contractions but have also triggered deeper realignments in trade strategy and economic governance.

i. **Acceleration of Trade Diversification and Regionalization**
BRICS countries are increasingly reducing dependency on the U.S. market. China and Brazil are expanding strategic ties with alternative partners like ASEAN and China, respectively, while Russia and South Africa are investing in regional trade blocs. This suggests a move toward regionalized trade architectures, diminishing the centrality of U.S.-centric trade flows.

ii. **Rise of Strategic Industrial Policy and Technological Sovereignty**
In response to tariff vulnerabilities, BRICS nations have intensified domestic industrial strategies. China's tech self-reliance push and India's "Make in India" are emblematic of a global resurgence in strategic state-led industrial policy, particularly in technology and pharmaceuticals—sectors heavily impacted by tariff regimes.

iii. **Shift toward a Multipolar Financial and Trade Order**
The collective BRICS response—especially de-dollarization efforts and RMB promotion—signals a growing intention to reshape global trade settlement systems. With the U.S. share in global trade declining from 20% in 2018 to 15% in 2025, the relative power of unilateral U.S. trade policy is diminishing, and alternative systems (e.g., BRICS Pay, local currency settlements) are gaining traction.

iv. **Structural Decoupling and Supply Chain Reconfiguration**
The regression model underscores that sectors with high trade exposure to the U.S. are the most economically vulnerable. This finding has long-term implications: companies and governments are likely to reconfigure supply chains, prioritize resilience over efficiency, and shift production closer to emerging consumer markets, especially within the Global South.

v. **Policy Precedents and Norm Shifts in Global Trade Governance**
U.S. tariffs—though politically motivated—have effectively legitimized broader use of protectionist tools. In response, BRICS countries are redefining trade norms through bilateral deals, tariff restructuring, and plurilateral cooperation, signaling a slow erosion of multilateral WTO-based frameworks.

CONCLUSION

This study explores the economic impact of Trump-era tariffs on BRICS countries, combining quantitative and qualitative analyses to assess sector-specific vulnerabilities and policy responses. The results show that U.S. trade exposure significantly influenced GDP contractions, with China most affected due to its strong integration into global value chains. In contrast, Russia and South Africa, with limited U.S. trade ties, faced minimal direct effects but leveraged the disruption to strengthen regional trade and financial independence. Regression analysis confirms a strong link between trade exposure and GDP decline, with inflation and sectoral structure also playing roles. Strategic state responses—such as China's tech self-reliance, India's "Make in India," Brazil's trade alignment with China, and de-dollarization efforts—illustrate how BRICS nations are recalibrating their economic strategies. Beyond short-term impacts, the tariffs have triggered a deeper shift in global trade governance. BRICS countries are fostering intra-bloc trade, institutional cooperation, and a multipolar economic order—challenging the U.S.-dominated system. These changes reflect a broader trend toward diversified, resilient, and politically autonomous growth models. Ultimately, the study highlights how tariffs now serve as geopolitical tools. The BRICS response underscores how protectionist shocks can drive structural transformation, positioning these economies as key architects of a redefined global trade landscape.

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