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REASSESSING INTERNATIONAL TRADE COSTS: THE ROLE OF CONVENTIONAL AND UNCONVENTIONAL BARRIERS

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ABSTRACT

Aim: This study reassesses the nature of international trade costs by examining both conventional barriers (e.g., tariffs, transportation costs) and unconventional ones (e.g., cultural, institutional, and conflict-related frictions). Special attention is given to conceptualizing interstate soft conflicts – non-violent, informal tensions between countries that can disrupt trade without relying on formal sanctions or militarized force. It revisits the author's previously introduced concept of "interstate soft conflict" within a broader framework of trade resistance and informal economic pressures. **Methods:** A qualitative case study approach was used to identify 20 instances of interstate soft conflict between 2000 and 2020. Cases were gathered through systematic keyword searches across media and public sources and categorized based on the type of conflict (direct or indirect), the actors involved (state, organization, or individual), and the nature of the actions taken (e.g., boycotts, protests, diplomatic retaliation). **Results:** The analysis reveals that interstate soft conflicts, though informal and non-institutional, can act as de facto trade barriers. They emerge from political, ethical, and cultural disputes and often lead to reputational damage, reduced trade engagement, and shifts in consumer behavior. These conflicts operate across multiple channels – state-led, organization-led, and consumer-led – and reflect broader geopolitical and ideological divides. **Conclusions:** In an era where formal trade barriers are declining, informal tensions are becoming a more significant source of trade friction. Recognizing interstate soft conflicts as part of the trade cost landscape is essential for understanding contemporary trade patterns and for designing policies that are resilient to both institutional and informal disruptions.

Key words: international trade costs, conventional and unconventional trade barriers, interstate soft conflicts

JEL codes: F13, F51, F59

INTRODUCTION

International trade plays a pivotal role in global development, enabling economic integration, technology diffusion, and market diversification. The costs of international trade vary widely. Bilateral resistance can arise from traditional barriers such as tariffs or transportation costs, as well as from unconventional barriers, including disparities in institutional quality, language, culture, and religion, or from conflict-related costs associated with various forms and levels of hostility. Therefore, bilateral resistance to trade can stem not only from measurable economic constraints, but also from more abstract or intangible sources, including divergent values, historical grievances, or political tensions [Heilmann 2016].

In a highly interconnected and globalized world, trade costs are a critical policy issue for all countries

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and a significant determinant of international trade volume. They help a country establish its position within global trade and production networks. Minimizing these costs enhances a country's competitiveness, attracts foreign investment, and integrates it into global supply chains. In contrast, high trade costs isolate countries from world markets, reduce access to goods and services, hinder economic growth, and limit the benefits of specialization [Arvis et al. 2013].

Although conventional trade barriers have declined substantially over the past few decades – most notably tariffs following the establishment of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) and the World Trade Organization (WTO) – the persistence of high trade costs in many bilateral relationships suggests that deeper frictions continue to constrain the full potential of global trade. Although accurate estimates of trade costs are very difficult to obtain due to their high variability across countries and commodities, limited data, or the fact that some types of trade costs are not directly observable (such as cultural barriers, communication, and information costs, etc.), according to Anderson and van Wincoop [2004], a reasonable estimate for the trade costs faced by a representative developed country is around 170%[1] of the producer price of exported goods and includes all transport, border-related, and local distribution costs from producer to final user.

In the economic literature, "Trade costs, broadly defined, include all costs incurred in getting a good to a final user other than the cost of producing the good itself: transportation costs (both freight costs and time costs), policy barriers (tariffs and non-tariff measures), information costs, contract enforcement costs, costs associated with the use of different currencies, legal and regulatory costs, and local distribution costs (wholesale and retail)" [Anderson and van Wincoop 2004, p. 691].

Over the past few decades, international trade has experienced significant growth due to advances in transportation, communication, and technology, as well as economic integration and a substantial reduction in international trade costs to a relatively low level. Jacks et al. [2011, p. 186] find that "in the forty years prior to World War I, the average level of the trade cost measure (expressed in tariff equivalent terms) fell by 33%. From 1921 to the beginning of World War II, the average level increased by 13%. Finally, the average trade cost measure has fallen by 16% in the years from 1950." However, Eaton and Kortum [2002] argue that trade would be five times what is currently observed if trade were frictionless. This "mystery of missing trade" [Trefler 1995] suggests that trade barriers are persistent and remain significant determinants of the volume and patterns of trade between countries. Addressing these barriers is crucial for fostering greater international trade and promoting global economic growth and prosperity.

While considerable research focuses on conventional trade costs, such as tariffs, distance, and logistics, comparatively less attention has been given to unconventional barriers, including cultural dissimilarities, institutional mismatches, and non-militarized interstate tensions, all of which can significantly disrupt trade flows [Taralashvili 2024b]. Recent literature highlights the growing importance of these unconventional frictions. Góes and Bekkers [2022] argue that trade patterns are increasingly shaped not just by economic fundamentals, but by rising geopolitical risks and fragmentation, which impose indirect but persistent trade costs. A recent study by Mostafiz et al. [2024] underscores the importance of cultural dissimilarities in shaping trade flows, while Taralashvili [2024b] offers a novel perspective on how soft conflicts can disrupt bilateral trade relations. Together, these contributions suggest a shift toward recognizing the non-economic dimensions of trade barriers. Building on these insights, this paper contributes to the expanding literature on unconventional trade costs and emphasizes their growing relevance

[1] The total is made up of international trade costs of around 74% (this number breaks down into 21% for transportation costs and 44% for border-related barriers) and domestic distribution costs of around 55%. Since trade costs are reported in terms of ad valorem tax equivalent, trade costs are multiplicative, not additive ($1.7 = 1.74 \times 1.55 - 1$). A breakdown of the 44% ad valorem equivalent of border-related trade barriers is as follows: 8% policy barrier, 7% language barrier, 14% currency barrier, 6% information cost barrier, and 3% security barrier. Meanwhile, 21% of transport costs are split into 9% time costs and 10.7% for the United States average direct transport costs. All numbers are based on representative evidence for developed countries.

in an increasingly complex global landscape. While prior literature often refers to such factors as informal trade costs or frictions, this study adopts the broader term unconventional trade barriers to capture both ideational and non-institutionalized sources of trade resistance, particularly in the context of interstate soft conflicts [Taralashvili 2024a, 2024b].

This study builds upon the author's prior empirical analyses of interstate soft conflicts and their effects on trade and migration. While those earlier papers introduced and empirically examined the impact of soft conflicts, outlining a preliminary typology, this study revisits the conceptual framework from a broader theoretical perspective. It aims to strengthen the recognition of informal tensions, such as economically significant costs, and to clarify why their inclusion is essential for a more comprehensive understanding of global trade dynamics.

CONVENTIONAL TRADE COSTS

To explain trade costs, we must examine the barriers that contribute to these costs. Barriers related to physical geography and economic policies have historically impeded trade between countries.

Despite the rise in international trade flows and the ongoing controversy over the so-called "death of distance" [Friedman 2005], a wide range of literature shows that geographic distance remains one of the most significant determinants of trade. Melitz [2008] argues that distance can generate a negative impact on international trade flows. Disdier and Head [2008] find that, on average, a 10% increase in distance lowers bilateral trade by about 9%. Leamer [2007, p. 110] stresses that trade declines sharply with distance, stating that the impact of distance on international trade described by the gravity model is possibly "the only important finding that has fully withstood the scrutiny of time and the onslaught of econometric technique."

Therefore, the most obvious explanation for bilateral resistance to trade is geographical distance, which leads to increased transportation costs.

Transportation costs, defined as all shipping expenses for internationally traded goods, represent one of the major components of trade costs, alongside tariffs and non-tariff measures (NTMs). However, according to Anderson and van Wincoop [2004] transportation-related costs are estimated to exceed tariffs.

High freight costs are influenced by various factors. Distance and other geographical characteristics, such as sharing a common border or being landlocked, as well as the quality of infrastructure and transportation-related services, the types of products traded, and whether these goods are shipped by road, sea, or air freight, all affect the measured costs. Limão and Venables [2001] state that doubling the distance increases overall freight rates and that landlocked countries face higher transportation costs than economies sharing a common border, while improving infrastructure enhances trade.

Although maritime shipping has traditionally been the primary and most cost-effective mode of transport between countries without a common border, and land transportation has been widely used among countries sharing a border, air freight has gained increasing importance over time. The main reason for this is the time saved in transit, as long delivery times increase costs and, consequently, act as barriers to trade, negatively impacting trade flows.

Overall, the high costs of transportation and the time spent in transit present obstacles to trade, making it challenging for the country to access other markets and reap the benefits of trade liberalization. According to Martínez-Zarzoso et al. [2003], doubling transport costs leads to a reduction in import value of between three and five times. In contrast, Skiba [2007] finds empirical evidence that transportation costs decrease as trade flows increase. Korinek and Sourdin [2011] claim that longer shipping times diminish trade volume, while Hummels and Schaur [2013] calculate the ad-valorem tariff equivalent of consumers' willingness to pay more for a good to be delivered one day earlier, finding that the time cost of one day in transit is equivalent to an ad-valorem tariff rate of 0.6–2.1%.

In addition to the barriers related to physical geography mentioned above, economic policies have historically impeded trade between nations.

As the most widely used policy tool to restrict trade, tariffs (a tax imposed by one country on goods and services imported from another) have steadily decreased since the establishment of the GATT in 1948, from an average of approximately 20%

to 30% to less than 4% [WTO, 2007]. Most tariff cuts have occurred since the formation of the European Union (EU) and the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), or as a result of preferential trade agreements in favor of developed, developing, and least-developed countries. While applied tariffs have been declining, governments have started to use non-tariff measures (NTMs). Niu et al. [2018] show that despite the reduction in tariffs between 1997 and 2015, NTMs have become the predominant source of trade protection.

NTMs are generally defined as "policy measures other than ordinary customs tariffs that can potentially have an economic effect on international trade in goods, changing quantities traded, prices, or both" [UNCTAD 2019, p. 5]. NTMs can be quite diverse, encompassing technical measures – sanitary and phytosanitary measures (SPS), technical barriers to trade (TBTs) – various traditional trade-restricting instruments (quotas, subsidies, price controls, rules of origin), and other behind-the-border measures (trade-related investment measures, government procurement, or distribution restrictions).[2]

Regarding studies that examine how tariffs and NTMs affect trade, Berden et al. [2009] argue that NTMs are more restrictive on the United States-EU trade and investment than tariffs. Hoekman and Nicita [2008] find that, on average, trade decreases more if NTMs are implemented rather than tariffs. Limão and Tovar [2011] show that tariff obligations in trade agreements increase the likelihood while limiting the capabilities of NTMs. Nicita and Gourdon [2013] state that the use of NTMs is extensive and increasing, especially concerning technical measures (SPS measures and TBTs). A large share (about 30%) of international trade is found to be affected by TBTs, and about 15% by SPS measures. Cadot and Gourdon [2016, p. ii] show that "deep-integration clauses in regional trade agreements, in particular the mutual recognition of conformity-assessment procedures, substantially reduce the price-raising effect of NTMs." They find that NTMs raise trade unit values, with an average price-raising effect of about 8% (3% for SPS measures and 5% for TBT ones). While Bernini et al. [2024] provide empirical evidence on the impact of import licensing, a type of non-tariff barrier, on trade volumes and market dynamics in Argentina, their analysis shows a 46% reduction in total imports, an 18% decrease in exports, and a 3% decline in employment.

UNCONVENTIONAL TRADE COSTS

International trade costs have traditionally been associated with formal, measurable barriers, such as tariffs, quotas, and regulatory restrictions, often referred to as conventional trade barriers. These are institutionalized and policy-based, making them relatively visible and quantifiable in trade models. However, beyond these conventional factors, trade patterns are also shaped by unconventional trade barriers: informal, non-institutionalized frictions that arise from incomplete information, cultural and linguistic differences, religious or ideological divergence, and institutional mismatches.

Unconventional barriers also include tensions and conflicts that emerge from various forms of hostility, whether political, diplomatic, or social, which create intangible yet impactful obstacles to trade. Unlike conventional barriers, these forms of friction are difficult to observe or quantify directly, but they can significantly depress trade flows.

Although traditional trade barriers have declined over recent decades, unconventional barriers continue to exert a strong and often underestimated influence on international economic relationships. This broader terminology builds on earlier literature discussing informal trade costs and frictions while also accommodating newer forms of ideational and reputational conflict that fall outside formal trade policy frameworks.

The cost of dissimilarity

To trade, individuals need to communicate, and communication is essential to facilitate the flow of information. The cost of obtaining information is similar to an intangible trade tax, influenced by various factors such as distance, language, expenses, and the quality of communication channels, etc. Fink et al. [2005] find that higher communication costs, measured

[2] For detailed information about NTMs classification, see: UNCTAD [2019].

as the average per-minute bilateral calling price charged to importers and exporters, negatively affect trade. The twentieth century was characterized by advances in communication and technology, which reduced communication costs and provided effective channels for searching, collecting, and exchanging information.

It is generally accepted that, alongside advanced telecommunication technologies, the use of a common language facilitates communication, reduces costs, positively impacts trade relations, and intensifies them. Melitz and Toubal [2014] state that two countries sharing the same official language tend to have a higher level of trade than two similar countries that do not share a common language.

This is why language has been a key variable that literature has used as a proxy for information costs and as a measure of the ease of communication between countries. Melitz [2008] demonstrates that a shared language, as a direct means of communication, has a significant impact on bilateral trade.

Apart from language, distance can be used as a proxy for information costs. Portes and Rey [2002] assert that the coefficient on bilateral distance decreases from −0.55 to −0.23 after including informational variables such as telephone call traffic and the number of multinational bank branches, along with distance, in the benchmark trade flows equation.

Cultural factors are well-known determinants of trade. To represent trade costs, many studies have extended the basic gravity equation of trade to include trade-facilitating factors such as common language and religion, a colonial past, and have found significant positive effects on the magnitude of bilateral trade flows [Hutchinson 2002, Melitz 2008]. Cultural similarity can facilitate more efficient communication between countries, as trading partners will better understand each other's cultures, beliefs, and values, thereby making trade easier. However, people are generally less informed about foreign markets and cultures. Cultural distance between countries, which increases with differences in language, religion, educational status, ideology, customs, and values, as well as a lack of historical ties and considerable geographical distance, raises costs and reduces trade.

Since international trade involves multiple governance systems, the quality of domestic institutions in securing property rights and contracts is an important determinant of trade costs. Anderson and Marcouiller [2022, p. 342] state that insecurity of property and contract enforcement imposes high costs on trade: "Corruption and imperfect contract enforcement dramatically reduce international trade. Contracts may not be enforceable across jurisdictional boundaries, customs officials may extort bribes, and shipments may even be hijacked." Conversely, when trade is supported by an effective rule of law and government regulation is transparent, countries tend to trade more. Jansen and Nordås [2004] claim that quality institutions increase openness and bilateral trade.

The cost of interstate conflicts

Among unconventional types of trade barriers, conflict-related costs have been found to have a substantial impact on international trade. When we imagine interstate conflict, we often think of large-scale disagreements among countries. However, beyond violent disputes and wars, interstate conflict can be defined more broadly, taking on different forms and levels of hostility. "Conflicts have different levels of intensity: lower-intensity conflict (trade disputes, sanctions, and threats of force); higher-intensity conflict (mobilization, use of armed force, and full-blown war); and the escalatory and de-escalatory processes that move conflicts from one level to another" [Mansfield and Pollins 2001, p. 852].

A significant amount of theoretical and empirical literature in political science[3] and in the field of economics examines the interrelationship between deteriorated relations and trade.

Theory suggests that trading countries experience a welfare gain, while conflicts deteriorate trade. Polachek [1980] was the first to explain the relationship between trade and conflict, demonstrating that a higher level of bilateral trade and increased interdependence

[3] Political scientists try to evaluate whether trade promotes peace (liberal school) or if increased asymmetries in existing relationships lead to a conflict between trading partners, affecting their economic relations (neo-Marxist school, realists). Even so, both theories agree that conflicts have a negative impact on trade [Barbieri and Levy 1999].

among partner countries minimize the incentives for conflict due to the high costs of tension. Martin et al. [2008] show that countries with more bilateral trade have a lower likelihood of bilateral war, while those engaged in multilateral trade, although reducing their degree of bilateral interdependence and minimizing their costs of bilateral conflict, have a higher probability of bilateral war. Pollins [1989] claims that in the long run, there is a two-way causality, where trade relations affect the level of conflict and cooperation among countries, and political relations affect trade flows.

It seems obvious that, *ceteris paribus*, the effect of conflict must be troublesome for economic activities, likely leading to a reduction in trade flows due to increased costs for traders. A wide range of literature empirically validates this view, demonstrating that wars and other forms of military conflict have a negative impact on trade flows. Nitsch and Schumacher [2004], likewise, Blomberg and Hess [2006] find that terrorism and large-scale violence have a negative effect on international trade. Glick and Taylor [2010] observe a persistent negative impact of both world wars on bilateral trade flows. Jacks et al. [2011] show that during the war, trade was entirely driven by the increase in trade costs caused by the war, highlighting that the importance of conflict on trade costs cannot be ignored. Long [2008] argues that expectations of armed conflict diminish trade as a result of increased transportation, transaction, and production costs of trade. Yet, some studies, e.g., Barbieri and Levy [1999], Morrow et al. [1998], find that war among major economies does not have a permanent, long-term effect on their trade relations.

Another stream of recent empirical literature, while supporting the view that conflict diminishes trade, also shows that trade promotes peace. Hegre et al. [2010], while affirming that the presence of military conflicts negatively affects bilateral trade flows because violence is costly, also support the idea that trade promotes peace and reduces the likelihood of conflict. Similarly, Oneal et al. [2003] find that trade has a significant effect in reducing dyadic militarized disputes, while militarized disputes reduce trade. Keshk et al. [2004] state that conflict impedes trade, while they do not find significant results for the effect of dyadic interdependence on conflict. McDonald [2004] demonstrates that higher levels of trade reduce military conflict.

Nowadays, instability in relationships is not linked to the extreme outcomes of war. According to Davis and Meunier [2011], in most cases, political relations range from normal to tense and occasionally to the risk of using force. Thus, changes in political relations occur within a less extreme range.

The political relationship at the governmental level involves deciding whether to maintain peace or engage in conflict with other nations. Several papers examine the extent to which political relations within this predominantly moderate range influence bilateral trade.

Pollins [1989] states that a tense bilateral political relationship negatively affects economic exchange due to decisions made by government representatives and the diplomatic or political climate. Numerous studies have examined the extent to which political relations under less extreme conditions impact bilateral trade. Davis and Meunier [2011], analyzing the trade patterns between the United States and Japan, find no negative impact of political tensions on bilateral trade. In contrast, Fuchs and Klann [2013], using the reception of the Dalai Lama as a measure of political tensions with China, show that countries hosting the Dalai Lama (the spiritual leader of Tibet who supports Tibet's sovereignty) at the highest political level experience a decline in export flows to China. While Anderson and Dollar [2000] argue that votes in the United Nations (UN) are a reliable indication of political alliances between countries – given that the nature of votes in the UN is highly correlated with alliances and similarities in economic and geographic interests – Mityakov et al. [2013] provide evidence that the deterioration in relations between the United States and its partner country, measured through changes in their voting patterns in the UN General Assembly, reduces United States imports from that country.

On the other hand, friendly bilateral diplomatic ties can promote economic activity. Rose [2007] finds that the presence of foreign missions (embassies, consulates, and the Foreign Service) is positively correlated with exports, and that each additional consulate is associated with an increase in exports. Lederman et al. [2010] state that a rise in the budget of export promotion agencies increases exports. Nitsch [2007]

finds that state and official visits increase bilateral exports for the USA, France, and Germany. Creusen and Lejour [2011] state that the presence of Dutch support offices abroad and trade missions in destination countries promotes trade and increases exports.

The impact of political tensions on trade flows can also arise at the individual level, as consumers tend to alter their decisions due to deteriorating bilateral political relations. Consumers may hesitate to purchase products produced in a country with which their own country is experiencing tensions. Consumer behavior studies suggest that animosity increases consumers' desire to boycott, which leads to a decrease in demand for goods associated with the opposing country [Klein et al. 1998]. Boycotts triggered by such tensions can serve as a tool to punish or change the behavior of trading partners or companies. According to Pollins [1989], consumer boycotts represent commercial weapons that can be used instead of military force.

Consumer boycotts have become more prevalent in recent decades due to the internet's role as a fast and efficient means of communication, allowing protests to be organized and supporters to be gathered simply by using hashtags on Twitter, Facebook posts, or WhatsApp messages. Boycotts can be communicated to millions of consumers worldwide in seconds. According to a new YouGov study [Harmston 2017], about 21% of consumers have reportedly boycotted a brand due to a scandal or negative press release. However, Koku [2012], which highlights the financial implications of internet-driven consumer boycotts, demonstrates that the market is almost unresponsive to such boycotts.

Boycotts are expressions of protest, primarily for ethical, social, economic, political, or environmental reasons. Regardless of their effectiveness, they are powerful public actions that can significantly harm a boycotted company, community, or country as a whole [Lee 2012].

Boycotts occur as expressions of protest, mainly for ethical, social, economic, political, or environmental reasons[4], regardless of their effective[5] or ineffective results[6], and are powerful public acts that can do real damage to a boycotted company, community, or country as a whole [Lee 2012].

There is a growing body of empirical evidence that consumers are changing their decisions as a result of strained political relations between countries, which negatively affect trade flows. Heilmann [2016] studies the impact of four different political tensions, measured as politically motivated boycotts, on trade and finds the negative effects of boycotts on trade flows, primarily impacting consumer goods. Empirical studies regarding the United States-France dispute over the Iraq War, analyzing sales of French wine in the United States, present varying results. Vannerson [2003] and Ashenfelter et al. [2007] find no boycott effect on sales after considering the seasonal effects of holidays and time trends, while Chavis and Leslie [2006] do. Moreover, Pandya and Venkatesan [2016] demonstrate that the market share of brands marketed as French, although not necessarily imported from France, has declined due to this tension. Analyzing the same political event, Davis and Meunier [2011] report no significant decline in the United States' imports of luxury goods associated with France. According to Clerides et al. [2015], the rise in anti-American sentiment caused by the Iraq War generated a statistically significant negative effect on the sales of United States goods in several Arab countries. Fouka and Voth [2013] find that Greek consumers reduced their purchases of German cars as a result of tense relations between governments during the debt crisis after 2010.

[4] The early boycotts were primarily triggered by high consumer prices or violations of labor and civil rights, while later ones shifted towards the protection of animal rights, as well as the rights of religious, ethnic, and sexual minorities, and environmental concerns.

[5] The most recent example of a successful boycott campaign arose from opposition to the Sultan of Brunei's decision to impose the death penalty on gay couples. In response, celebrities and Los Angeles officials have called for a boycott of the Sultan's hotels. As a result, the new criminal law in Brunei was abolished [Financial Times 2019].

[6] Even if boycotts do not lead to change, they bring attention to problems and can influence public opinion, as occurred in 1955 when a boycott arose from tensions over public buses in Montgomery, marking the beginning of the modern civil rights movement in the United States [Friedman 2002].

Interstate soft conflicts

In today's global economy, no country operates without interactions that span a continuum from normal relationships to tense trade disputes, paramilitary conflicts, and the most extreme cases of war. This study is motivated by the observation that the deterioration of relations between countries often stops short of the extreme outcome of violence or war; yet, lower-level tensions can adversely impact the economy. The transition from normal relations to tense ones is conceptualized here as an "interstate soft conflict" [Taralashvili 2024b].

Interstate soft conflict refers to a form of non-militarized tension between nation-states that arises in response to perceived political, social, or cultural grievances. These tensions manifest not through formal sanctions or military action, but through symbolic, reputational, or grassroots measures – including public protests, boycotts, diplomatic gestures, or organized civil resistance – and are increasingly seen as capable of influencing economic ties between countries.

These non-violent but politically charged tensions can exert significant influence on international economic activity, including migration and trade [Taralashvili 2024a, 2024b], and operate across three main levels: states, organizations, and individuals.

At the state level, governments may leverage migration and trade restrictions as tools for punishment, policy enforcement, or ideological resistance. For instance, China has used its economic power to respond to perceived diplomatic slights. Fuchs and Klann [2013] show that countries hosting the Dalai Lama – a figure associated with Tibetan independence – at a high diplomatic level subsequently experienced a drop in exports to China. Similarly, governments can retaliate against specific companies; a prominent example occurred in 2018 when Chinese authorities canceled Dolce & Gabbana's fashion event and triggered consumer backlash after the brand's advertising campaign was viewed as culturally offensive Bloomberg News [2018].

At the organizational level, companies, NGOs, and trade unions may contribute to soft conflicts by protesting or publicly rejecting the practices of a company or country. In 2008, for example, Nokia's decision to relocate production from Germany to Romania resulted in organized demonstrations by German unions [Westall 2008]. Similarly, in 1995, Danish retailers boycotted French products in response to France's controversial nuclear tests in the South Pacific [Bentzen and Smith 2001].

At the individual level, consumers often act based on their political beliefs or sentiments by avoiding products from disputed countries or companies. These actions can have substantial economic consequences. Chavis and Leslie [2006] demonstrate that tensions between the United States and France over the 2003 Iraq invasion led to a measurable decline in the United States' sales of French wine. Similarly, Cambodian civil society groups organized a boycott against Tate & Lyle Sugars in 2010 over alleged land seizures and human rights violations [Le Coz 2013].

Interstate soft conflict does not cause conflict by itself, but allows different parties to exhibit contradictory, conflicting behavior if each party attempts to act unacceptably. While the underlying causes of interstate soft conflict may relate to those of conflict and can precede conflict (if tensions escalate sufficiently), it is not always synonymous with conflict and does not consistently align with cooperation. Although they fall short of war or formal diplomatic sanctions, their impact on trade flows, migration policies, and economic relations can be profound.

Despite their potentially significant consequences, interstate soft conflicts are not intended to escalate into militarized disputes or institutional sanctions. Instead, they function as unconventional policy instruments, often as effective as tariffs, embargoes, or travel restrictions in influencing political or commercial outcomes.

In summary, interstate soft conflicts share several defining features:

- They involve multiple actors, including governments, civil society groups, and individual consumers, and can manifest through actions such as diplomatic statements, public campaigns, renegotiation of agreements, or organized boycotts.
- They are triggered by a broad array of causes, including political, ideological, historical, environmental, or ethical factors, which create reputational or normative friction.

- These tensions operate through three primary channels: state-led responses, organizational advocacy, and individual or collective consumer behavior.
- Their purpose is typically to exert pressure, signal disapproval, or prompt behavioral change in the targeted country or entity.
- While non-violent and unofficial, they function as soft instruments of influence, often bypassing formal diplomatic or legal mechanisms.

AIM AND METHODS

The primary objective of this paper is to reassess the nature of international trade costs by expanding the analytical framework beyond conventional economic barriers to include unconventional, non-institutionalized factors, in particular, the role of interstate soft conflicts. By conceptualizing and systematically examining these unconventional tensions, the study aims to demonstrate how such conflicts, although non-violent and unofficial, can generate significant frictions that may influence bilateral trade flows.

To achieve this objective, the study adopts a qualitative case study approach supported by systematic data collection. The case selection process begins with comprehensive keyword searches using major search engines, including Google, Bing, Yahoo, and Baidu [Avila 2017]. The searches target media reports, online journals, academic publications, and working papers that contain the keywords "boycott", "tension", "dispute", and "conflict" in their headlines or body text.

The time frame is limited to the period from 2000 to 2020, selected for practical reasons of data availability and coverage. While no specific assumptions are made about this period being exceptional, it is assumed to reflect typical patterns of interstate soft conflicts in the recent period.

Once potential cases are identified, a logic-based filtering method is applied to assess their relevance. This screening process evaluates the motivation behind the conflict, the timing of the event, and the nature of the actions taken.

Only those cases involving interstate tensions, i.e., between two or more states, are included in the final dataset. Purely domestic or intrastate conflicts are excluded from consideration.[7]

RESULTS

As a result, numerous cases were identified and subsequently narrowed down to those occurring at the interstate level. The refined dataset comprises 20 cases of interstate soft conflict that align with a definition, each mapped to 194 dyadic country pairs. These cases are briefly summarized in Table 1, which includes the countries involved, the year of occurrence, the nature of the conflict, and its underlying reason.

The 20 cases were classified into two broad types:

- Indirect soft conflicts (13 cases): Targeting countries as a whole, often sparked by political, military, diplomatic, or cultural events, along with decisions made by governments that are deemed unacceptable by other countries, ethnic and racial minority organizations, animal and environmental protection groups, as well as consumers. Public sentiment and civil activism – especially from consumers, NGOs, or interest groups – translate into protests, boycotts, or refusals to engage with the country in question. Such unconventional pressure may lead to widespread protests against the country in question, resulting in a refusal to engage with it.
- Direct soft conflicts (7 cases): Targeting specific companies whose actions, policies, or public messaging are perceived as violating political, environmental, or social norms by senior government officials, various associations or trade unions that advocate for human, animal, or minority rights, as well as individual or collective consumers. In such cases,

[7] For instance, campaigns like #GrabYourWallet against Ivanka Trump's brand, which ultimately led to the closure of the company [Hyland 2016]; the organization Freedom for Animals' initiative named 'Sea Lies,' which urged people to boycott all Merlin Entertainment brands due to their mistreatment of captive animals, especially whales, in their aquariums [Freedom for Animals 2014]; or the United States Campaign for Safe Cosmetics' (CSC) boycott of Johnson & Johnson [News Digital 2011] due to the company's use of harmful chemicals in their baby shampoo were excluded because they do not reflect intergovernmental or country-to-country tensions.

the backlash often materializes through organized protests, consumer boycotts, or institutional condemnation.

The most frequent underlying causes were:

- Political tensions (4 cases);
- Human rights violations (4 cases);
- Environmental or animal rights concerns (3 cases);
- Territorial disputes (2 cases);
- Cultural discrimination or racism (3 cases);
- Religious sensitivity (1 case);
- Economic/nationalist backlash (2 cases);
- Diplomatic trust issues (1 case).

These motivations often reflect broader ideological divides and were typically triggered by diplomatic decisions, media campaigns, or corporate misconduct.

Soft conflicts operate through multiple channels: state-led (e.g., diplomatic retaliation), organizational-led (e.g., NGO boycotts), and consumer-led (e.g., social media backlash). Countries like China, the U.S., and European nations feature prominently as both sources and targets, with China as an initiator (5 cases) and target (6 cases), reflecting its central role in recent geopolitical friction. The U.S. and European countries appear both as sources and targets, often due to value-based activism (e.g., human rights, animal testing).

Though these soft conflicts do not involve formal trade sanctions, they often result in reputational damage, consumer boycotts, and disrupted exports. Several empirical studies [Clerides et al. 2015, Heilmann 2016, Taralashvili 2024b] confirm their negative impact on trade flows. These findings highlight the unconventional yet potent role of soft conflicts in shaping international trade dynamics. Their frequency and variety emphasize the need to incorporate such conflicts into broader understandings of trade costs and global economic interactions.

Table 1. List of interstate soft conflicts

No[a]	From	Towards	Year	Case	Reason	Summary
1	United Kingdom	France	2000	L'Oreal Still Tests on Animals	animal rights	Naturewatch launched a boycott due to L'Oréal's use of ingredients tested on animals [Naturewatch Foundation 2000].
2	United Kingdom	United States	2001	Stop Esso Campaign	environmental	Greenpeace and activists protested Exxon-Mobil's environmental practices [Greenpeace 2001].
3	United States	France	2002	Tension Over Iraq War	political	France's opposition to the Iraq invasion led to the United States consumer boycotts of French products [Vannerson 2003].
4	Arab World[b]	United States	2002	Tension Over Iraq War	political	Arab consumers boycotted the United States goods due to opposition to the Iraq War [Clerides et al. 2015].
5	Columbia	United States	2003	Killer Coke	human rights	Coca-Cola was accused of paramilitary--linked violence against workers in Colombia [Brodzinsky 2003].
6	Spain	China	2004	The Spaniards Against "Made in China"	economic/cultural	Shoe workers protested Chinese imports and immigration, citing unfair competition [Pingree 2004].
7	Muslim Countries[c]	Denmark	2006	Muhammad Cartoon Crisis	religious	Publication of Prophet Muhammad cartoons led to widespread boycotts of Danish goods [Heilmann, 2016].
8	Ireland	Japan	2007	Save the Whales	environmental/ /animal rights	Protest against Japanese whaling resulted in a consumer boycott of Japanese products [Irish Examiner 2007].
9	Canada	Saudi Arabia	2007	Diplomatic Spat	political	Canada's criticism of the Saudi justice system led to tensions and calls for economic retaliation [CBS 2008].
10	Germany	Finland	2008	Germans Boycott Nokia	economic/ /human rights	Nokia's plant closure in Germany triggered a nationalist consumer backlash [Westall 2008].

Table 1. List of interstate soft conflicts (cont.)

No[a]	From	Towards	Year	Case	Reason	Summary
11	China	Norway	2010	Nobel Peace Prize Dispute	diplomatic trust	China suspended diplomatic meetings after Norway awarded dissident Liu Xiaobo the Peace Prize [Watts and Weaver 2010].
12	Greece	Germany	2010	Greek Debt Crisis and Memories	political/historical	Austerity measures sparked anti-German sentiment and led to a decline in German car sales in Greece [Fouka and Voth 2013].
13	China	Philippines	2010	Manila Hostage Crisis	human rights	A botched hostage rescue led to a Chinese boycott of Philippine tourism [BBC 2010].
14	Cambodia	United Kingdom	2010	Cambodian Blood Sugar!	human rights	Activists boycotted Tate & Lyle over land grabs and abuses in Cambodia [Le Coz 2013].
15	Philippines	China	2011	Boycott "Made in China"	territorial	The Philippine governor called for a boycott amid Spratly Islands tensions [Arguelles 2012].
16	China	Japan	2012	Senkaku/Diaoyu Islands Conflict	territorial	The island dispute triggered Chinese anti-Japanese protests and product boycotts [Heilmann 2016].
17	China	Maldives	2013	Cup Noodles Crisis	cultural discrimination	Chinese tourists protested discriminatory hotel policies, calling for a boycott [Global Times 2013].
18	China	Japan	2017	Visit to Taiwan	political	A Japanese official's visit to Taiwan drew Chinese protests and diplomatic criticism [Jingxi 2017].
19	Mexico	U.S.	2017	Water or Beer?	environmental justice	Locals protested Constellation Brands for exploiting drinking water supplies [CB 2018].
20	China	Italy	2018	Dolce & Gabbana Under Fire	racism	Racist ad campaign led to event cancellations and widespread consumer backlash in China [Bloomberg News 2018].

[a]Cases highlighted in grey are related to direct interstate soft conflicts.

[b]Officially, there are 22 countries in the Arab world: Algeria, Bahrain, Comoros, Djibouti, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Mauritania, Morocco, Oman, Palestine, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia, United Arab Emirates, and Yemen (http://worldpopulationreview.com/countries/arab-countries/).

[c]The treatment group for the Muhammad Cartoon Crisis includes 69 countries where the Muslim population exceeds a 15% threshold, based on data from Pew Research (https://worldpopulationreview.com/country-rankings/muslim-population-by-country). This threshold was selected to identify the top tier of Muslim-majority nations most likely to be engaged in or impacted by the tension. The global distribution of Muslim populations is highly uneven; 50% of countries have Muslim populations below 5.7%, while 75% fall below 57.7%. Using a 15% cut-off captures the top 30% of this distribution, allowing for a more targeted and meaningful analysis. A full list of countries included in the treatment group is available upon request.

Note: Summaries are paraphrased from primary sources cited in the References. All cases were identified through keyword-based searches, as described in the Aim and Methods section. Full case descriptions are available upon request.

Source: Author's work based on Taralashvili [2024a, 2024b].

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study underscore the growing importance of unconventional trade barriers – specifically, interstate soft conflicts – in shaping international trade patterns. Unlike traditional trade costs such as tariffs, soft conflicts emerge from ideological, diplomatic, or ethical tensions between states and civil societies. These frictions, though informal and non-institutional, often lead to real economic consequences such as reputational damage, consumer boycotts, and disrupted trade flows.

The classification developed – distinguishing between direct and indirect soft conflicts – offers a novel framework for understanding the different actors and channels through which these tensions manifest. Indirect conflicts, often triggered by political or diplomatic events, illustrate how widespread civil society reactions can pressure states economically, even without formal sanctions. In contrast, direct conflicts target firms and brands, often mobilizing reputational risks via consumer activism, civil organizations, or institutional censure.

These insights align with and expand earlier studies linking diplomatic tensions to trade decline [Clerides et al. 2015, Heilmann 2016] by offering a conceptual framework to explain how and why such disruptions occur. In doing so, the study contributes a more granular, typological approach that distinguishes between state-level and firm-level tension, and between motivations rooted in politics, ethics, territory, or identity. This adds nuance to the debate on how non-economic variables influence trade relationships.

The findings also carry implications for international business, trade policy, and diplomacy. As global consumers become increasingly politicized and companies become more vulnerable to public backlash, economic actors must navigate a more complex landscape of reputational risk and cultural sensitivity. This shift highlights the need for policymakers and economists to account for non-material sources of trade resistance.

Nonetheless, this study is not without limitations. The case selection, while systematic, is not exhaustive, and media-based sourcing may introduce bias toward highly publicized events. Future research could explore larger datasets, examine the duration and intensity of trade impacts, or investigate how soft conflicts interact with formal diplomatic strategies.

CONCLUSION

This study reassesses the landscape of international trade costs by introducing the concept of interstate soft conflicts – non-violent, politically, or socially motivated tensions that disrupt trade through informal, non-institutionalized channels. By analyzing 20 selected cases from 2000 to 2020, it demonstrates that both direct and indirect soft conflicts can function as de facto trade barriers, despite lacking formal sanctioning power.

The findings highlight how reputational dynamics, cultural friction, and civil activism can materially affect trade flows, particularly in the global economy, where companies and consumers are increasingly politicized and interconnected. Recent studies [Taralashvili 2024a, 2024b] further reinforce this perspective, showing that such tensions have measurable and lasting negative effects on bilateral trade and even migration patterns.

As the global trade system becomes more influenced by value-based conflicts, diplomatic disputes, and reputational politics, understanding the mechanisms and consequences of soft conflicts becomes essential. This paper refers to these dynamics as part of a broader class of unconventional trade barriers, building on – but extending beyond – existing work on informal trade costs and frictions. Future research should build on this typology presented here to quantify its economic impact, explore causal channels, and inform policy responses that mitigate the trade-disruptive effects of unconventional tensions.

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PONOWNA OCENA KOSZTÓW HANDLU MIĘDZYNARODOWEGO: ROLA BARIER KONWENCJONALNYCH I NIEKONWENCJONALNYCH

STRESZCZENIE

Cel: Celem badania jest ponowna ocena charakteru kosztów handlu międzynarodowego poprzez analizę barier zarówno konwencjonalnych (np. taryf celnych, kosztów transportu), jak i niekonwencjonalnych (np. uwarunkowań kulturowych, instytucjonalnych oraz konfliktów). Szczególną uwagę poświęcono konceptualizacji między państwowych konfliktów miękkich – niewiążących się z przemocą, nieformalnych napięć między krajami, które mogą zakłócać handel bez odwoływania się do formalnych sankcji czy działań militarnych. Artykuł rozwija wcześniej wprowadzoną przez autorkę koncepcję „międzypaństwowego konfliktu miękkiego" w szerszych ramach oporu wobec handlu i nieformalnych nacisków ekonomicznych. **Metody:** Zastosowano jakościowe studium przypadku w celu identyfikacji 20 przypadków międzypaństwowych konfliktów miękkich w latach 2000–2020. Przypadki zebrano poprzez systematyczne wyszukiwania słów kluczowych w mediach i źródłach publicznych, a następnie sklasyfikowano według rodzaju konfliktu (bezpośredni lub pośredni), zaangażowanych aktorów (państwo, organizacja, jednostka) oraz charakteru podejmowanych działań (np. bojkoty, protesty, retorsje dyplomatyczne). **Wyniki:** Analiza wykazała, że konflikty miękkie między państwami, mimo iż mają charakter nieformalny i pozainstytucjonalny, mogą pełnić funkcję faktycznych barier handlowych. Wynikają one z różnic politycznych, etycznych i kulturowych, a często prowadzą do strat wizerunkowych, ograniczenia wymiany handlowej oraz zmian w zachowaniach konsumentów. Konflikty te działają wielokanałowo – inicjowane przez państwa, organizacje lub konsumentów – i odzwierciedlają szersze podziały geopolityczne oraz ideologiczne. **Wnioski:** W epoce malejącego znaczenia formalnych barier handlowych nieformalne napięcia stają się coraz bardziej istotnym źródłem tarć w handlu. Ujęcie międzypaństwowych konfliktów miękkich jako elementu krajobrazu kosztów handlu jest do zrozumienia współczesnych wzorców wymiany oraz opracowania różnych rodzajów polityki odpornej na zakłócenia instytucjonalne, a także nieformalne.

Słowa kluczowe: koszt handlu międzynarodowego, bariera konwencjonalna, bariera niekonwencjonalna, międzypaństwowy konflikt miękki