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**Adaptive Actions:
Bystanders' Responses to the U.S.-China Trade War**

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Abstract

This thesis examines the implications of the U.S.-China trade war on the global geopolitical shift from 2019-2024. Specifically, I pay attention to the effect of the third parties' export responses to the mutual tariff barriers during the U.S.-China trade war on the frequency of the diplomatic visits that were sent to Beijing and Washington, compared to prior to the trade war. Methodologically, I employ a shift-share framework to ensure the exogeneity of the trade war shock and construct an original dataset on diplomatic visits of 44 states. The results reveal that while the trade shock generally has no statistically significant effect on the diplomatic engagement within the designated time, there is an asymmetrical effect between the two destinations: the diplomatic visits to China increase along with a stronger shock, but there is no significant effect on visits to the U.S. More importantly, only bystander states that gain more export to China from the spillover effect of the trade war exhibit such an asymmetrical pattern. Finally, by incorporating public opinion into the model, the study finds that domestic attitudes have no significant effect on leaders' visits, at least during the trade war period.

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Introduction

Since 2018, strategic competition between China and the U.S. has expanded across virtually all fronts. The trade war, marked by punitive tariff barriers and export restrictions, explicitly signals a return to the great power competition. As the world's two most powerful states, their escalating tensions are deemed to reshape international politics. Seven years later, scholars have been trying to portray a likable future for this rivalry relationship. Mearsheimer, for instance, argues that there will be two thick bounded orders, led by Beijing and Washington, respectively, that involve intense security and economic competition (2019). Other famous scholars, adhering to the idea that China is aiming to build a separate order, argue that it will be an illiberal order that is fundamentally different than the LIO that reflects China's state-led system (Lim & Ikenberry, 2023; Weiss & Wallace, 2021; Rolland, 2019). Nonetheless, these articles place more emphasis on theorizing the grand picture and rarely provide a straight answer grounded in empirical evidence. An exception is Qian et al., who argue that a geopolitical shift is underway by empirically comparing the roles of the AIIB and the World Bank in delivering development assistance. Still, the implication of the trade war is under-examined. Equally important, how other states perceive and react to the whole issue is overlooked.

On the contrary, scholars who study the U.S.-China trade war focus solely on the economic aspect. Hanson, focusing on the domestic influence, argues that the tariff increases the cost of living of Americans as they bear the most burden, is unlikely to revive the manufacturing sector, and fails to force a structural reform of China's economic system to a consumption-based growth (2020). Furthermore, by examining stock market returns around key trade war dates, Huang et al. assess firm-level impacts and find that businesses experienced negative returns across both upstream and downstream segments of the supply chain (2023). Amiti et al. also analyze the firm-level stock market responses to tariff announcement dates. They quantify the investment effects of the trade war and estimate that rising tariffs reduced U.S. firms' aggregate investment growth by nearly two percentage points by the end of 2020 (2023). While the articles mentioned above discuss the direct

economic impact on the great powers, another set of authors explores the spillover effect of the trade war on a larger scale. Dang et al. analyze the tariff impact on the global supply chain and conclude that while China's exports to the U.S. dramatically decrease, third countries, notably the EU, ASEAN, and Mexico, serve as substitutes and increase their export to the U.S. by about 4-8% (2023). Specifically, by analyzing EU trade flows during the U.S.–China trade war, Goulard (2020) finds that EU exports of soybeans to China rose by 55% in 2019, and French wine exports to China increased by 20%, as European firms partially filled gaps left by U.S. exporters.

Even though the most observable outcome of the trade war comes from the economic perspective, the political consequences are certainly worth a close examination. Thus, focusing on the trade war, this research examines the perspective of bystander states—those indirectly affected by tariff barriers—and how changes in exports have reshaped their approach to great powers, contributing to a broader global geopolitical shift. I argue that when there is an ongoing geopolitical competition between the two great powers, an increase in exports to China or the U.S. due to the trade war strengthens a bystander state's alignment with that power. To assess the effect, taking advantage of the most recent published work by Fajgelbaum et al. (2024), which reveals the heterogeneous export responses to the tariff across the bystander states, I developed a shift-share empirical model based on a theoretical framework to uncover the linkage between the trade-war shock and the bystander states' diplomatic approach towards China or the U.S. This research contributes to the broader literature of international relations in two ways: first, it offers a perspective of the third parties in the trade war, broadened our understanding of impacts of the U.S.-China competition in a global scale; second, it develops a quantitative empirical model that links the economic impacts of the trade war to its political consequences.

The remainder of the thesis is structured as follows: the Theory and Hypothesis section presents a detailed description of key assumptions and establishes the causal relationship between the trade war shock and diplomatic engagement with two proposed hypotheses for testing; the Research Design section thoroughly describes the empirical strategy and data sources; the Findings section presents and discuss the results of the empirical model

Theory and Hypothesis

The Spillover Effect of the Trade War

On the international trade aspect, the spillover effect refers to the global trade diversion caused by the mutual tariff barriers between the US and China. A simplified model with four players can help to explain the rationale. Consider a world with no tariffs and fully liberalized trade. In this system, State *A* exports raw materials to State *B*, which are used to manufacture a final product *i* that is consumed in State *C*. When State *C* imposes a tariff on imports from State *B*, importers in State *C* reduce or halt their purchases from State *B* and instead shift their sourcing to State *D*, which can provide a comparable version of product *i*.

As a result, exporters in State *B* suffer directly from decreased purchases, and, subsequently, upstream suppliers in State *A* also experience fewer orders due to their dependency on manufacturers in State *B*. At the same time, exporters in State *D* win more contracts that would not have existed under the non-tariff scenario. In other words, the tariff imposed by State *C* on State *B* reshuffles the traditional supply chain, hurting the relevant industries of State *A* and State *B* while benefiting firms operating in State *D*.

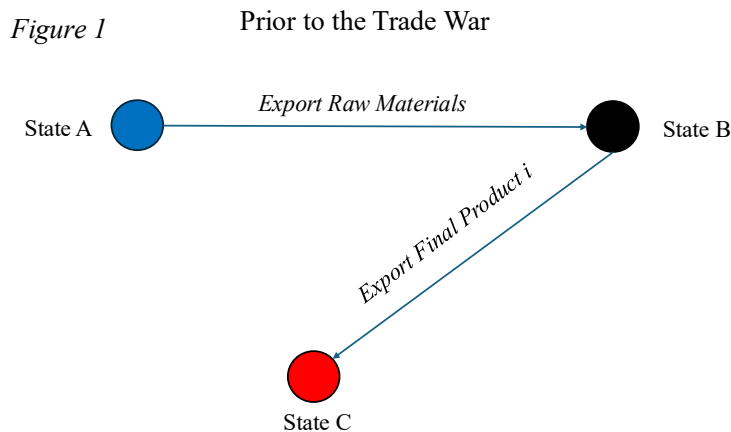
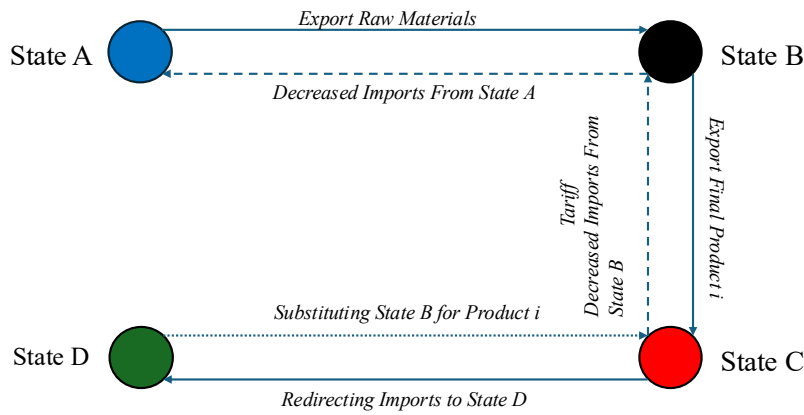


Figure 2 During the Trade War



One might point out that, if the global demand for Product i remains stable, State A can simply redirect its exports to complement State D, following the downstream supply chain relocation. In this case, the tariff barriers between State B and State C have a minimal effect on State A, resulting in trade losses that occur only between the two states directly engaged in the trade war. Meanwhile, bystanders, such as State D, can take advantage by filling the market gaps, thereby benefiting from the trade war.

However, Fajgelbaum et al suggest otherwise. By taking the supply forces into account, their research demonstrates a substantial heterogeneity across bystanders' export responses to the tariff (2024). Specifically, a downward supply curve indicates a negative correlation between the cost of production per unit and the quantity of production, while an upward supply curve means a positive correlation between the two. In the context of the trade war, countries whose exports complement China's exports on tariff-targeted products face a decline in demand from China. Thus, a downward-sloping supply curve will increase the cost of production, making the products less

competitive in the global market, which in turn will cause a decrease in exports to both the US and the Rest of the World. Meanwhile, an upward-sloping supply curve leads to an increase in exports to the Rest of the World but a decrease in exports to the US. On the contrary, countries that substitute China’s role will experience an increased demand from the US market. As a result, following the same logic, operating along a downward-sloping supply curve leads to an increase in exports to both the US and the Rest of the World simultaneously, while an upward-sloping supply curve means an increased export to the US comes at the expense of exports to the Rest of the World.

Table 1		<i>Country c's Export Responses to the US</i>	
		Decrease	Increase
<i>Country c's Export Responses to the Rest of the World</i>	Increase	China Complement, Upward-Sloping Supply	China Substitute, Downward-Sloping Supply
	Decrease	China Complement, Downward-Sloping Supply	China Substitute, Upward-Sloping Supply

Note: This table is reproduced from Table A.1 in Fajgelbaum et al. (2024), with minor modifications.

In reality, the US-China trade war generated global-scale spillover effects, mainly for two reasons: the sheer economic volumes of the two great powers and the wide range of tariff-targeted goods. In 2017, prior to the implementation of tariff barriers against China by the Trump administration, the United States and China together accounted for \$4.15 trillion in total merchandise trade, representing approximately 21.2% of global imports and exports (WTO STATS). In terms of the tariff, by the end of Trump’s first term, the escalation of the mutual tariff barriers had covered \$450 billion of products (Fajgelbaum et al, 2024). More importantly, the complementary nature of the US-China

trade relation since the beginning of the 21st century, that is, China exports low-medium end manufactured products and imports high-end technology and agricultural products from the US, meant that the tariff affected a broad cross-section of industries in both economies, and in turn, globally. The question is how the global trade diversion would translate to political realignment.

Political Re-engagement

What drives a state to align with another politically? I argue that an interaction of two underlying forces operating in opposite directions is forging the political shift. On one hand, the strategic rivalry between the United States and China generates pressure on third-party states to choose sides as both powers actively seek to expand their geopolitical influence, as presented later in the chapter. On the other hand, the economic benefits resulting from trade diversion, a spillover effect of the US–China trade war, create incentives for bystander countries to deepen engagement with the benefactor state. In other words, while the two great powers are competing to expand their geopolitical influence in various ways, this introduces a strategic dilemma. In the meantime, the export gain from the trade diversion persuades bystanders to join one side. This leads to the key assumptions that construct my theoretical framework.

First Assumption: The US and China are engaging in a hegemonic competition in which both sides are competing over geopolitical influence over weaker countries.

This assumption is crucial to my argument. First, actions that show political alignment, like high-level diplomatic visits, primarily serve a state's strategic interests and require a mutual agreement between the visiting and host states (Lebovic & Saunders, 2016) (Koliev & Lundgren, 2021). By acknowledging the ongoing geopolitical competition between the U.S. and China, I assume that (1) there is a reduced possibility of hedging between the two great powers, compelling states to make a strategic decision to lean toward one side, and (2) the host states (the U.S. and China) are receptive to the signals of alignment from other states. Consequently, as both the U.S. and China seek to pull other states into their geopolitical orbit, an increase in exports due to the trade war enhances

the possibility of aligning with one side, incentivizing bystander states to strengthen their bilateral relationship with China (or the U.S.).

The following paragraphs show the logic behind the assumption. The rise of China has posed challenges to the liberal international order, which has been characterized by U.S. hegemonic power. These challenges stem from two key factors: (1) China's rapidly growing economic and military capabilities and (2) the illiberal, authoritarian nature of its political system. Despite integrating into the liberal international order for nearly three decades, China has not followed the expected path of liberalization and democratization. Instead, it has leveraged the existing system to achieve economic prosperity while strengthening its state-led model (Weiss & Wallace, 2021).

With its growing material power, China demands more discourse power in various international institutions and regimes that it sees as matching its material strength, and more importantly, seeks to reshape the global order to reflect its own values (Lim & Ikenberry, 2023). While such a challenge to the international order is only observable in certain issue-specific domains, such as the topic of human rights and information governance. (Johnston, 2019). Nonetheless, the rule of the game has changed to the problem of the "relative gain" because China's ability to close the power gap to the U.S. Hence, the U.S., as the leader of the liberal international order, has framed China's actions as a revisionist challenge, accusing China of breaking a series of rules in the "rule based" international system, including the issue of unfair subsidy for state-owned enterprise, manipulation of Renminbi's exchange rate, and taking advantage of the WTO system with a developing country status, etc.. Ultimately, during Trump's first administration, it led to a trade war, supply chain decoupling, and a bipartisan agreement aimed at containing China's growth. Thus, the dynamics of the U.S.-China relationship align with the cycle proposed by hegemonic order theory, which suggests that the rise of an emerging great power inevitably clashes with the existing order (Gilpin, 1981). It further creates what Mearsheimer calls "bounded orders," which describe how two competing leading states advance their geopolitical interests by drawing weaker states into their sphere of influence (2019). Through this process, the hegemon effectively projects its values and establishes the rules of the game.

What is China's vision for the future international order? The answer to this question is largely vague, except for the assertion that China's unsatisfactory attitudes towards the liberal international order and its tension with the U.S. The Chinese intellectuals and policymakers are also unable to provide a clear theoretical answer nor drawing out a big picture mainly because the rise and fall of an international order is a long period of time, which is still at its early stage, leaving the examination of China's grand project more on observation (Rolland, 2020, p.47). In practice, China is actively expanding its geopolitical influence through a range of China-led initiatives and institutions, including the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), and the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), ranging from economic development to international security. None of these multilateral institutions/ initiatives include the U.S. as a member state. Besides that, the core values that China embedded into them are, in summary, respect for sovereignty, win-win cooperation, and partnership (Lim & Ikenberry, 2023). China repeatedly emphasizes the importance of sovereignty as the foundation of contemporary international relations, claiming every state has the right to choose its own development path, and opposes the universal values endorsed by the liberal international order. The most suitable presentation of win-win cooperation and partnership is the BRI, which is primarily composed of a series of bilateral agreements aimed at achieving mutual economic development. The loose and non-rule-bound nature of the BRI serves as an alternative to a rule-based international order, promoted greatly by the Chinese Government.

On the US side, the past two administrations showed distinct approaches toward geopolitical interests, mainly differing in whether to preserve the liberal international order. On the one hand, Trump's first administration pursued a unilateral foreign policy, withdrawing from a series of international organizations and multilateral treaties that it founded, including the Trans-Pacific Partnership, Paris Agreement, and WHO, while also claiming WTO treated the U.S. "unfairly" and blaming it for allowing China to enjoy policy benefits as a "developing country". On the other hand, the following Biden administration demonstrated a firm interest in defending the liberal international order. By emphasizing the reestablishment of cooperation with its allies and the restoration

of America's image of being a world leader in the international community as the guiding principles of Biden's foreign policy, the U.S. re-joined and strengthened its participation in international institutions. More importantly, the Biden Administration expanded the scope of the cooperation that securitized economic development by imposing more sanctions against Chinese entities and reconstructing the global supply chain that encircled China. Hence, despite the drastic differences in policy interests and completely opposed positions on the political spectrum, both administrations share the same end goal in foreign policy: to contain China's geopolitical expansion in various dimensions and make sure the U.S. remains the sole hegemony in the world. Thus, given the time frame of this research, 2019-2024, this assumption holds

Second Assumption: The general trend of trade diversion for bystander countries is irreversible in the short term.

The second assumption explains why export growth driven by the trade war provides stronger incentives for bystanders than a natural increase (e.g., due to more competitive products). The key difference is that trade war-induced export gains to China often do not have the same effect on exports to the U.S., and vice versa, as bystanders are affected by tariffs from both sides. In contrast, a natural increase in exports does not entail such trade-offs. The empirical results show that only 5 out of 50 states experienced an increase in exports to both the U.S. and China (Fajgelbaum et al., 2024). Thus, if such losses are irreversible, as assumed, bystander states would allocate political resources where potential growth is achievable.

According to the model developed by Fajgelbaum et al., the key drivers of trade diversion are (1) tariff barriers and (2) the bystander country's position in the global supply chain for tariff-targeted goods—whether as a complement or substitute to China or the US (2024).

I argue this assumption is valid because these two driving factors remain largely intact from 2019 to 2024, the time of interest in this research. First, the final round of tariff escalation during Trump's first term occurred on September 1, 2019. The Biden administration later maintained the same level of tariff barrier, and so did China.

Second, prior to the trade war, the formation of the global supply chain was the result of the neo-liberalism globalization characterized by free trade coordinated by the World Trade Organization and the intra-industrial division of labor led by multinational corporations based on factor endowment. In other words, states, especially for the small and medium-sized ones, are dependent on a few large export industries, following the concept of comparative advantages. One good example is Chile, whose economy is deeply tied to copper mining, which accounts for over half of the country's export revenues and is a critical source of government financing and foreign reserves (U.S. Department of Commerce, 2023; S&P Global, 2023). Thus, in the context of this research, the key question is: Can a country that previously served as a complement to China (or the U.S.)—and subsequently experienced a decline in exports to China (or the U.S.) due to the trade war—restructure its industry to become a substitute for Chinese (or U.S.) products within a few years? The answer is no. The Chinese goods targeted by the US tariffs are primarily finished products, meaning that for a country that previously complemented Chinese goods, substituting them would require substantial investment and a highly skilled labor force. Such a structural adjustment could take decades to achieve. The same logic applies to the US goods targeted by tariff barriers set by China.

High-level Diplomatic Visits

As mentioned previously, to demonstrate political alignment, I use high-level diplomatic visits because they effectively indicate the engagement of the two states and the intention to improve the bilateral relationship, as “the scarcest resource in government is high-level attention” (Kastner & Saunders, 2012). Meanwhile, the existing literature on high-level diplomatic visits suggests that strategic interests—such as security and economic ties—are the primary drivers, with trade relations being one of the strongest indicators. (Lebovic & Saunders, 2016) (Koliev & Lundgren, 2021) (Balci & Pulat, 2024). At the same time, scholars also find that high-level diplomatic visits can strengthen the trade relations between two states (Nitsch, 2007; Lavalley & Lochard, 2022; Moyer

et al., 2025). Thus, the scarcity of high-level attention and the close relationship between high-level diplomatic visits and trade make high-level diplomatic visits suitable for evaluating political alignment.

However, it is necessary to note that despite the many firm empirical evidence that support a causal relationship between trade and high-level diplomatic visits, the amount of turbulence in exports induced by the tariff barrier is expected to generate heterogeneous political responses across the country. This is to say that not all states will adjust their foreign relation with the great powers because of a shift in their exports. There are two reasons behind this. First, trade is not the sole factor that determines a bilateral relationship, but is intertwined with security, shared values, and geopolitics. While the tariff barrier may negatively impact a bystander's trade relations with China/the U.S., there is no clear evidence showing that such an external shock can produce a spillover effect to the other vital determinants mentioned above. This leads to the second factor: how valuable does trade contribute to a bystander's bilateral relationship with China/the U.S., compared with shared interests. The China-Vietnam relations provide a good example. Geopolitically, Vietnam sits underneath China's southern border. Despite a temporary border conflict in the last century, the two states have a history of a tied bilateral relationship with frequent diplomatic interaction that can be traced back to the 15th century. Culturally, Vietnam is part of the "Great Confucianism Circle," in which the society is embedded with China's influence, evident by the adoption of a Chinese-style bureaucracy, Confucian education, and the civil servant examination system. Politically, both states established centralized socialist political systems led by their respective communist parties, with a strikingly similar institutional design characterized by One-Party Rule and Leninist organizational structures. Since the re-normalization of diplomatic relationships in 1991, the inter-party/state interactions have remained frequent. Hence, even though Vietnam stands out as one of the "winners" of the trade war by producing substitutes for Chinese products in the U.S. market, it is unlikely to see a stagnation of diplomatic visits between China and Vietnam simply because the U.S. has become a more important export destination. Similar logic can be applied to U.S.-Japan relations. Japan complements U.S. exports to China, leading to a decrease in U.S. exports, but we should not

expect to observe a significant drop in diplomatic visits from Japan, as the U.S. views it as a core ally in the Asia Pacific region.

Further, studies also suggest that high-level diplomatic visits follow a pattern in which, for example, a foreign leader visits China or the U.S. every three years (Lebovic & Saunders, 2016). It is almost certain to observe at least one high-level diplomatic visit from most bystanders from 2019 to 2024, given the importance of China and the U.S. on the world stage. To address this, I plan to use the frequency of high-level diplomatic visits to account for the pre-trend in visits, so that I can better estimate the effect.

Hence, I propose the main hypothesis for testing:

H1: If the bystander experiences an aggregate export gain to China (or the US) due to the trade war, there will be more frequent high-level diplomatic visits to China (or the US) than prior to the trade war.

In the context of this research, a high-level diplomatic visit is defined, adhering and adopted from the definition provided by the Office of Historian, US Department of State, as an individual and face-to-face meeting between a foreign head of state or government with the US (or Chinese) leadership that occurs in the US (or China), and it excludes group meetings such as NATO conferences unless a separate meeting is noted.

I recognize there are alternative explanations that focus on the influence of domestic politics rather than strategic interests. The politician credit-claiming theory suggests that legislators exploit asymmetrical information between the government and the public to consolidate electoral support by taking credit through publicity for positive outcomes they were not actually responsible for (Grimmer et al., 2012). In the context of this research, an incumbent leader may attribute export gains from the trade war to their own efforts by making a high-level visit to China (or the US). This serves as an effective credit-claiming tool since high-level visits generate significant publicity, leading to increasing domestic support. In other words, a leader is more likely to visit China (or the US) where their state has experienced export gains—an outcome that aligns with the predictions of my

theory. Further, a public visit to a great power can serve as a showcase to deter domestic political opponents by showing the incumbent leader is recognized by a great power, decreasing the risk of removal (Malis & Smith, 2021).

However, from a purely theoretical standpoint, it is impossible to determine whether strategic interests or domestic popularity serve as the dominant motivation behind high-level diplomatic visits without firm empirical evidence. Both factors matter tremendously to a national leader who, at the same time, cares about political survival as a politician. More importantly, high-level diplomatic visits can often serve both strategic and domestic interests simultaneously, making it even more difficult to understand the underlying motivation by simply examining the destinations of such visits.

To address it, I take an alternative strategy. If credit-claiming/ domestic popularity theory holds, one can reasonably argue that politicians not only follow the money but also align with domestic public opinion. In other words, when domestic popularity carries more weight, national leaders will avoid visiting a state that is viewed unfavorably by their domestic voters. Hence, I propose the second hypothesis for testing:

H2: If the bystander experiences an aggregate export gain to China (or the US) due to the trade war, there will be more frequent high-level diplomatic visits to China (or the US) than prior to the trade war even if the destination state is viewed unfavorably by domestic voters.

Research Design

Hypothesis 1

In Hypothesis 1, I aim to estimate the causal effect of trade diversion from the US-China trade war on the changing political alignment. The core idea is that states benefiting from increased exports to China (the U.S.) will strengthen diplomatic engagement with that power. To examine patterns in diplomatic engagement, the analysis focuses on the top 50 countries ranked by trade volume. From this group, I exclude major oil-exporting states, countries involved in ongoing armed conflicts, those without recognized diplomatic authority, and China and the United States themselves. This results in a final sample of 44 countries included in the analysis. However, the observed changes in exports are endogenous. They may reflect not only trade diversion, but also domestic industrial policies, prior political alignment, or strategic repositioning. A naïve OLS regression would risk conflating these factors and producing biased estimates.

To address this, I employ a shift-share design, a commonly recognized empirical strategy to solve the endogeneity concern. Similar to the well-known piece on shift-share design by Autor et al, my shift-share explanatory variable predicts trade gains by two components: 1) predicted product-level trade diversion shocks induced, and 2) the pre-trade war share of tariff-targeted products in each bystander's total export (Autor et al., 2013). Hence, the shocks are driven solely by tariff changes and are independent of diplomatic visits, while the exposure shares are exogenous as they are pre-determined by pre-trade war data. However, the shift-share variable I construct is a reduced-form measure rather than an instrumental variable, which is a more common approach in the existing literature. For example, in Autor et al, their "share" part of the shift-share instrument is the trade volume between China and other developed economies to proxy the trade volume between China and the U.S. to ensure exogeneity (2013). Hence, it requires a fairly strong first stage effect to make it a valid instrumental variable. In my approach, the shift-share variable is constructed directly from the observed export changes between each bystander country and each destination market, as I will demonstrate later. Therefore, it does not serve as an instrument, and conducting a first-stage

regression to test its validity would be conceptually inappropriate. Further, This design satisfies the conditions outlined in Borusyak et al. (2022): the shifts are plausibly random because they result from the bilateral tariff barriers set by China and the U.S., and the shares are predetermined, making it exogenous. Thus, it provides a valid strategy to isolate the effect of trade diversion on diplomatic alignment.

To specify, the trade-war shock for country c to China and the U.S. market is constructed as, respectively:

$$\widehat{\text{TradeGain}}_{cUS} = \sum_i (s_{ci}^{\text{US}} \cdot g_i^{\text{US}} - s_{ci}^{\text{CN}} \cdot g_i^{\text{CN}} - s_{ci}^{\text{RW}} \cdot g_i^{\text{RW}})$$

and

$$\widehat{\text{TradeGain}}_{cCN} = \sum_i (s_{ci}^{\text{CN}} \cdot g_i^{\text{CN}} - s_{ci}^{\text{US}} \cdot g_i^{\text{US}} - s_{ci}^{\text{RW}} \cdot g_i^{\text{RW}})$$

where:

- i indexes product categories, identified at the HS-6 level.
- s_{ci}^d is the share of country c 's total exports in 2016–2017 that come from product i to destination $d \in \{\text{US}, \text{CN}, \text{RW}\}$
- g_i^d is the exogenous shift: the general-equilibrium (GE) model predicted change in global demand for product i in destination d arises from the bilateral tariffs between the US and China, developed by Fajgelbaum et al. (2024)

In their paper *The US–China Trade War and Global Reallocations*, Fajgelbaum et al. estimate, for each destination $d \in \{\text{US}, \text{CH}, \text{RW}\}$ and each exporter–variety ω in HS6 product i ,

$$\Delta \ln X_{i\omega}^d = \underbrace{\beta_{1,i\omega}^d \Delta \ln T_{CH,\omega}^{US} + \beta_{2,i\omega}^d \Delta \ln T_{US,\omega}^{CH} + \beta_{3,i\omega}^d \Delta \ln T_{i,\omega}^{US} + \beta_{4,i\omega}^d \Delta \ln T_{i,\omega}^{CH}}_{\text{direct tariff shock}}$$

$$+ \underbrace{\alpha_{hs6} + \alpha_{cty_iso3}}_{\text{HS6 \& country FEs}} + \underbrace{\Omega_d \text{SIZE}_{i\omega}^d + \pi_d \Delta \ln X_{i\omega,t-1}^d}_{\text{size \& lagged growth}} + \varepsilon_{i\omega}^d.$$

I then extract the fitted values $\Delta \widehat{\ln X}_{i\omega}^d$ from this regression and collapse from the variety to the product level by averaging over all ω in product i , generating a destination-specific shock for each HS6 product i that is common across all bystander exporters, so every state faces the same product-level shift in that market. :

$$g_i^d = \frac{1}{|\{\omega : \omega \in i\}|} \sum_{\omega \in i} \Delta \widehat{\ln X}_{i\omega}^d.$$

Finally, I aggregate the results at the country level for further analysis. Thus, the shift-share variable provides a plausibly exogenous prediction of how much each bystander country c gained from trade diversion, weighted by their exposure to the tariff-targeted products prior to trade war.

The outcome of interest is the change in the frequency of high-level diplomatic visits from each bystander state c to each great power $d' \in \{\text{CHN}, \text{US}\}$ between 2013-2017 and 2019-2024. The cutting point for the two periods is 2018, when the trade war broke out. Notice that, the latter period, which is the post trade war period, spans one year longer than the former one. This adjustment reflects the disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic: on the one hand, governments prioritized domestic public health over foreign affairs; on the other, stricter border controls made physical diplomatic exchanges significantly more difficult. These constraints were particularly pronounced in China due to its stringent “Zero-COVID” policy. To account for this, I aggregate the two pandemic years—2020 and 2021—into a single year in the analysis. As mentioned previously, by focusing on the change in visits between two periods rather than their absolute levels, it accounts for the baseline differences in diplomatic practices across the countries that could attribute to other

unobserved and time-invariant factors, allowing a cleaner estimation of causal relationship.

Hence, the outcome variable is constructed as the following:

$$\Delta \text{Visits}_{cd'} = \text{Visits}_{cd'}^{\text{Post}} - \text{Visits}_{cd'}^{\text{Pre}}$$

Where:

- $\text{Visits}_{cd'}^{\text{Pre}}$ is the total number of visits from country c to destination d between 2013 and 2017.
- $\text{Visits}_{cd'}^{\text{Post}}$ is the total number of visits during 2019–2024.
- Data on high-level diplomatic visits to China are retrieved from the People’s Database (*ren-min shuju*), an official archive maintained by *People’s Daily* that documents the political activities of Chinese leaders, including meetings with foreign heads of state. On the U.S. side, data are sourced from the Office of the Historian at the U.S. Department of State, which maintains records of meetings between the U.S. President and foreign leaders.

Given the independent variable, $\Delta \text{Visits}_{cd}$, and the dependent variable $\widehat{\text{TradeGain}}_{cd'}$, the reduced form model is constructed as:

$$\Delta \text{Visits}_{cd'} = \alpha + \beta \cdot \widehat{\text{TradeGain}}_{cd'} + \gamma' X_c + \delta_{d'} + \mu_c + \varepsilon_{cd'}$$

- β measures the causal impact of export gains on changes in diplomatic frequency. A positive β indicates that countries increasing their trade with d' also increased diplomatic outreach to d .
- δ_d is a destination fixed effect to account for baseline differences in how often countries visit the U.S. versus China.
- μ_c is a origin fixed effect that account for persistent differences in countries’ general diplomatic activity, independent of the trade diversion shock.

- X_c is the logged Distance to d' : Accounts for geographic costs, retrieved from Mayer and Zignago (2011).

Hypothesis 2

In Hypothesis 2, the goal is to test the alternative explanation that the high-level diplomatic visits to China and the U.S. are motivated by politicians' narrower interests of publicity and domestic support. In this sense, high-level diplomatic visits should take place in accordance with domestic public opinions towards the two destinations. To explore this, I include both trade-related gains and public opinion as explanatory variables. I use the survey data from the PEW Global Attitudes and Survey Database to construct the new variable, which surveys people from 68 states regarding their favorability on foreign states, while 30 of them are the my targeted states. For the purpose of my research, I retrieved the data of the questions "Please tell me if you have a very favorable, somewhat favorable, somewhat unfavorable, or very unfavorable opinion of...? a. the United States" and "a. China". To address potential concerns about reverse causality—namely, that diplomatic visits may influence public opinion—I restrict the sample to survey responses from the years 2013 to 2018, prior to the onset of the U.S.–China trade war. Then, I create a single country-level favorability index $\text{FavorIndex}_{cd',t-1}$ by the aggregating the data over the designated years and weighted by the proportion of each response answer. Specifically, for each bystander state c , I define the Favorability Index towards state $d' \in \{\text{US}, \text{CN}\}$ as:

$$\text{FavorIndex}_{cd',t-1} = \frac{(+1.0) \cdot N_{\text{very fav}, c}^{d'} + (+0.5) \cdot N_{\text{somewhat fav}, c}^{d'} - (0.5) \cdot N_{\text{somewhat unfav}, c}^{d'} - (1.0) \cdot N_{\text{very unfav}, c}^{d'}}{N_{\text{total}, c}^{d'}}$$

where:

- $N_{\text{total}, c}^{d'}$ is the total number of responses (including "don't know") for country c and destination d' ;
- Each sentiment count is summed across all survey waves from 2013 to 2018.

This yields a continuous score ranging from -1 to $+1$:

- A score of $+1$ means all responses were “very favorable”;
- A score of -1 means all responses were “very unfavorable”;
- A score of 0 indicates a balanced or neutral public opinion.

Thus, I construct the OSL model as:

$$\Delta \text{Visits}_{cd'} = \alpha + \beta_1 \widehat{\text{TradeGain}}_{cd'} + \beta_2 \text{FavorIndex}_{cd',t-1} + \gamma' X_{cdt} + \delta_d + \mu_c + \epsilon_{cdt}.$$

Moreover, to examine whether the effect of one depends on the level of the other, I include an interaction term between trade gains and public opinion. This interaction allows me to assess whether, for instance, public sentiment becomes a stronger predictor of diplomatic behavior when trade exposure is low, or whether trade gains are more politically rewarding when public opinion is favorable.

The model with an interaction term is specified as:

$$\Delta \text{Visits}_{cd'} = \alpha + \beta_1 \widehat{\text{TradeGain}}_{cd'} + \beta_2 \text{FavorIndex}_{cd',t-1} + \beta_3 (\text{FavorIndex}_{cd',t-1} \times \widehat{\text{TradeGain}}_{cd'}) + \gamma' X_{cdt} + \delta_d + \mu_c + \epsilon_{cdt}.$$

Findings

Main Results

I begin by addressing the primary theoretical question of this research: the effect of the trade-war shock on the frequency of high-level diplomatic visits by bystander states to China and the United States. Table 2 presents the results of the model laid out for testing Hypothesis 1. While there is a positive estimated coefficient, suggesting that, with 1 unit increase in trade-war shock, the average number of high-level diplomatic visits to China and the U.S. increase 2.708 across all bystander states, the effect is not statistically significant. In other words, despite the positive correlation, I cannot establish a causal relationship based on the empirical data of 44 bystander states. I therefore cannot reject the null hypothesis that bystander states do not increase high-level visits to China or the U.S. in response to greater export gains to those destinations.

Table 2: **Effect of Trade-War Shock on Diplomatic Visits TWFE**

	High-Level Visits
Trade-War Shock	2.708 (3.531)
Log Distance	0.051 (0.472)
Adjusted R^2	0.229

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

Standard errors clustered by origin-country (cty_iso3).

Given that the available empirical evidence does not align with my theory, I suspect that bystander states may respond differently depending on the source of the export gain. In other words, while the previous model assumes that bystander states treat their bilateral relationships with China and the U.S. equally, conditional on the previous trend in diplomatic practices that account for historical

ties, it is possible that bystander states treat the two destinations differently, making them more sensitive to the gain of one side over the other. To further uncover the pattern, I add an interaction term between the trade-war shock and the two destinations of high-level diplomatic visits, allowing me to compare bystander states' diplomatic approaches between the two destinations.

Table 3: **Trade-War Shock × Destination TWFE**

	High-Level Visits
Trade War Shock×Destination=China	10.593*
	(4.594)
Trade War Shock×Destination=US	-15.457*
	(7.453)
Log Distance	-0.010
	(0.483)
Adjusted R^2	0.264

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

Standard errors clustered by origin–country (cty_iso3).

Table 3 presents the regression output with an interaction term. The result confirms the speculation that bystander states take distinct approaches toward their bilateral relationships with China versus the U.S. With one-unit increase in trade shock, the number of high-level diplomatic visits to China from the bystander states increase by 10.593 compared to the pre-trade war period, but the number of diplomatic visits to the U.S. drops 4.87. Both coefficients are statistically significant.

Note that the unit of the key explanatory variable $\widehat{\text{TradeGain}}_{cdt}$ is measured as the natural logarithmic difference in trade volume, meaning one unit increase in the trade-war shock represents 170% increase in export. Based on the shift-share model, the average increase in export to the U.S. for all bystander states is 0.016 logged difference (1.6%), ranging from -0.078 (-7.51%) to 0.118 (12.54%). On the China side, the average increase in export is 0.03 (3.5%) logged differ-

ence, ranging from -0.012 (-1.19%) to 0.208 (23.13%). Thus, the average 0.016 log-point increase in exports to the U.S. is associated with a decrease of approximately 0.08 high-level diplomatic visits to Washington, based on the estimated coefficient from the regression, which barely changes bystander states' diplomatic practice towards the U.S. Conversely, given an average export gain of 0.03 log points, bystander states are estimated to make 0.318 additional high-level diplomatic visits to China relative to the pre-trade war period, with the largest increase reaching up to 2.2 visits.

Why bystander states respond more strongly and positively to trade gains from China over the U.S.? There are a few possible explanations. The first one has to do with China's unique political system and institutional foundation. China's economy is commonly understood as a state-led structure in which the central government is responsible for designing the macroeconomic system, emphasizing a proactive participation of the government in not only regulating and overseeing the market system but also in resource allocation. The Chinese government names it as "Socialist market system with Chinese characteristics" or a "Party-state capitalism/ Authoritarian capitalism" by Western scholars (Huang & Tsai, 2022; Pearson et al., 2021). Further, the public sector remains a vital actor in China's economy. On one hand, the state-owned enterprises dominate or even monopolize the commanding heights of China's strategic industries, including energy, telecommunications, health-care, finance, transportation, and defense manufacturing. This is not a residual or accidental feature of China's economic system, but a deliberate and institutionalized outcome of state planning. The Chinese government has long regarded SOEs as the foundation of national economic security and political stability (Chen, 2023; Beck & Brødsgaard, 2022). On the other hand, public investment serves as a significant engine for economic development. China has long been accused by the U.S., or the Western countries more broadly, for empowering Chinese companies to compete in the global market and distorting a fair market environment through industrial policies, government subsidies, and preferential access to financing. Regardless of the right or wrong of such accusations, China's electronic vehicle and renewable energy sectors have benefited substantially from government support, ranging from technology breakthroughs to building domestic supply chains. (Allan & Nahm, 2024). Meanwhile, Chinese government has been rapidly expanding its balance sheet since 1994 to

finance large-scale infrastructure projects and support an ambitious urbanization plan to facilitate high-level economic growth. This expansion has been taken place through both central government spending and local government finance vehicles, resulting in massive investment in transportation networks, energy systems, and industrial parks (Liu et al. 2021). Taking all this into account, given the decisive role of China's public sector in its economic system, establishing a concrete and close diplomatic relationship with the Chinese government is not only beneficial but also vital for foreign states that wish to strengthen their presence in China's market. In a system where the state plays a central role in shaping economic outcomes, diplomatic ties could generate commercial opportunities that might otherwise be inaccessible. Accordingly, when bystander states experience export gains to China as a spillover effect of the U.S.–China trade war, undertaking high-level diplomatic visits to Beijing may be among the most effective ways to reinforce and expand those gains. Nonetheless, it is beyond the scope of this research to develop a formal theoretical model to elaborate the logic presented above in detail, and the available data do not allow for a rigorous examination of the relationship between high-level diplomatic visits to Beijing and a country's commercial presence in the Chinese market after the trade war.

Furthermore, the observed variation between China and the U.S. may reflect differences in the way bystander states evaluate their relationships with each destination, that is, the heterogeneous responses. To explore such possibility, I stratify the 44 bystander states into two groups: (1) those that experienced a greater export gain to the U.S., and (2) those that experienced a greater export gain to China. As a result, the former group comprises 23 bystander states, while the latter contains the remaining 21. The rationale behind is that, due to the nature of the bilateral tariff barriers between the U.S. and China, two-thirds of the bystander states who substitute the U.S. products, in turn gain more export to China, are developing countries (14 out of 21) because the U.S. products targeted by China's tariff are mostly chemical, animal and agriculture products and industrial inputs. Similarly, bystander states who can serve as an alternative to China in the U.S. market by providing manufactured goods are largely consisted by developed countries (18 out of 23). Therefore, I can explore the potential variation between global north and global south countries in ways of

responding to the trade-war shock.

Table 4: **Effect of Trade-War Shock on Diplomatic Visits TWFE (More Export Gain to China)**

	High-Level Visits
Trade–War Shock	-0.468 (6.933)
Log Distance	0.429 (1.004)
Adjusted R^2	-0.467

* p<0.05; ** p<0.01; *** p<0.001

Standard errors clustered by origin–country (cty_iso3).

Table 5: **Effect of Trade-War Shock on Diplomatic Visits TWFE (More Export Gain to the U.S.)**

	High-Level Visits
Trade–War Shock	11.576* (5.509)
Log Distance	0.151 (0.470)
Adjusted R^2	0.501

* p<0.05; ** p<0.01; *** p<0.001

Standard errors clustered by origin–country (cty_iso3).

I run two separate regressions, one for each group, and the results are presented in Table 4 and 5. According to Table 4, the estimated trade-war shock on bystanders that gain more export to China is minimal and not statistically significant. This suggests that with destination fixed-effects, those bystander states, mostly developing countries, are not responsive to the export gain from the trade war, in terms of sending high-level diplomatic visits. In contrast, as shown in Table 5, the other group of more developed bystander countries is highly responsive to the trade war shock with an estimated effect of 11.576 that is statistically significant. Connecting back to Table 3, the distinct results indicate that the less developed bystander states, which belong to the group that had a greater export gain to China, are the ones that show a negative correlation between export gain and the number of diplomatic visits to the U.S.

Similarly, I include an interaction term to investigate destination-specific variations. The results, presented in Table 6 and Table 7, support my previous speculation. As shown in Table 6, the estimated effect of the trade-war shock on visits to China is strongly positive for bystander states that experienced larger export gains to China. In contrast, the effect on visits to the United States is negative and almost equally strong. Both coefficients are statistically significant. In Table 7, the estimated effects for bystander states with a greater export gain to the U.S. are nearly identical between the two destinations. This pattern may be partly explained by China's foreign policy strategy, which has increasingly emphasized engagement with the Global South, which framing itself as the leader of the third-world and urging for greater attention to the developing countries that consist the majority of the states in the world. As demonstrated by Qian et al., they argue that the success of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, a multilateral institution led by China with similar functions of the World Bank, is primarily due to the growing grievance towards the U.S. led international order among the Global South countries and, also, China's growing strength and status (2023). However, this research cannot provide a conceptualized explanation for the observed distinct behavior between the two groups of bystander states, which may be a potential space for future research.

In conclusion, while the primary empirical model demonstrates a moderate positive correlation

between the trade-war shock and the frequency of high-level diplomatic visits relative to the pre-trade war period, the results lack statistical significance. This indicates that the available data do not provide sufficient evidence to reject the null hypothesis that the trade-war shock had no effect on the number of bystander states' diplomatic visits to China and the United States. Interestingly, when incorporating an interaction term between the trade-war shock and destination, the results shows an asymmetric pattern: bystander states tend to increase diplomatic visits to China in response to greater trade shocks, while their visits the United States remains relatively unchanged. I speculate that the difference may attribute to China's state led economic structure that makes diplomatic engagement a vital strategy to strengthen trade relationship. Additionally, stratifying bystander states into two groups based on the magnitude of their trade gains suggests a clear divergence: those experienced a greater export gain to the U.S. are predominantly developed economies, whereas those gaining more from trade with China are largely developing countries. Such a division rises because China's retaliatory tariffs have focused on agricultural and animal products and industrial inputs, while U.S. tariffs have primarily targeted manufactured goods leading to substitute products from each side being sourced from a specific segment of the industry. Finally, the group-specific empirical results reveal that the "China" group shows a similar asymmetric pattern, with increased visits to China but no corresponding increase to the U.S. In contrast, the "U.S." group aligns more closely with the theoretical expectation of this research that bystander states are more likely to increase high-level diplomatic visits to the destination where they experienced greater export gains. With no specific theoretical explanation to such a divergent phenomenon, my speculation argues that it may caused by China's Global South focused foreign policy that provides growing economic and political assistance to developing countries.

Table 6: **Trade-War Shock × Destination TWFE (More Export Gain to China)**

	High-Level Visits
Trade War Shock×Destination=China	16.372* (6.627)
Trade War Shock×Destination=US	-33.013** (8.810)
Log Distance	0.383 (0.904)
Adjusted R^2	0.155

* p<0.05, ** p<0.01, *** p<0.001

Standard errors clustered by origin–country (cty_iso3).

Table 7: **Trade-War Shock × Destination TWFE (More Export Gain to the U.S.)**

	High-Level Visits
Trade War Shock×Destination=China	11.639 (11.134)
Trade War Shock×Destination=US	-0.077 (12.849)
Log Distance	0.151 (0.449)
Adjusted R^2	0.475

* p<0.05, ** p<0.01, *** p<0.001

Standard errors clustered by origin–country (cty_iso3).

Alternative Explanation

First of all, I directly measure the effect of public opinion on the frequency of diplomatic visits relative to the pre-trade war period by including it as an explanatory variable, result represented in Table 8. It reveals neither trade-war shock, consistent with previous model, nor public opinion has a statistically significant effect on the frequency of the diplomatic visits with fixed effect.

Furthermore, I run the empirical model with an interaction term between the two explanatory variables to explore the relationship. The output, as shown in Table 9, indicates that for all bystander states, an opposing relationship exists between public opinion and trade-war shock on their effects on diplomatic visits, meaning that when public opinion polls show unfavorable views of China or the U.S., the trade-war shock will still or more likely drive leaders to visit that country. However, this interaction effect is not statistically significant, and the associated standard errors are large, indicating substantial variation in the data. As such, there is insufficient empirical evidence to draw firm conclusions regarding this relationship.

Table 8: **Trade-War Shock and Public Opinion TWFE**

	High-Level Visits
Trade War Shock	1.908 (4.636)
Favor Index	2.00 (1,964)
Log Distance	-0.015 (0.477)
Adjusted R^2	0.210

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

Standard errors clustered by origin-country (cty_iso3).

Table 9: Trade-War Shock and Public Opinion with Interaction Term TWFE

	High-Level Visits
Trade War Shock	7.291 (8.038)
Favor Index	0.192 (2.851)
Log Distance	0.183 (0.522)
Trade War Shock× Favor Index	-43.629 (37.171)
Adjusted R^2	0.216

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

Standard errors clustered by origin–country (cty_iso3).

Yet, the rationale behind the credit-claiming theory/ domestic popularity theory is that politicians would follow the public opinion because the democratic institution requires them to be responsible for their voters, whereas not all bystander states have a well-established democratic system even though most of them are democracies. Hence, I focus on the “U.S.” group identified in the previous model, which consists predominantly of developed countries. According to the results presented in Table 10, the effect of the trade-war shock is strongly positive and statistically significant, consistent with my previous findings. However, public opinion still shows an insignificant and moderate effect on the frequency of high-level diplomatic visits. In regard to the relationship between the two variables, the positive coefficient on the interaction term, as shown in Table 11 suggests that the effect of the trade-war shock on high-level diplomatic visits is stronger when public opinion toward the destination country is more favorable. This pattern is consistent with credit-claiming and domestic popularity theory that leaders—particularly those from more democratic states—are

responsive to domestic sentiment when undertaking diplomatic engagement with major powers such as China and the United States. Again, the above interpretation is not back by empirical evidence since the result is not statistically significant.

In conclusion, based on the available data, the results of the empirical models, both with and without the interaction term, do not support the notion that leaders systematically take public opinion into account when conducting high-level diplomatic visits to China and the U.S. Moreover, when the trade-war shock is strong, public opinion neither has a statistically significant direct effect on diplomatic visits nor meaningfully moderates the relationship between trade shocks and such visits. Therefore, Hypothesis 2, that bystander states will visit China or the U.S. when experiencing an increase in exports, regardless of what the domestic public opinions show, partially holds, conditioning on states that had a greater export gain to the U.S.

Table 10: **Trade-War Shock and Public Opinion TWFE (More Export Gain to U.S.)**

	High-Level Visits
Trade War Shock	14.029** (4.564)
Favor Index	3.405 (1.713)
Log Distance	-0.018 (0.478)
Adjusted R^2	0.606

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

Standard errors clustered by origin-country (cty_iso3).

Table 11: **Trade-War Shock and Public Opinion with Interaction Term TWFE (More Export Gain to U.S.)**

	High-Level Visits
Trade War Shock	11.572 (5.598)
Favor Index	5.955 (3.037)
Log Distance	-0.250 (0.504)
Trade War Shock× Favor Index	48.750 (54.320)
Adjusted R^2	0.594

* p<0.05, ** p<0.01, *** p<0.001

Standard errors clustered by origin–country (cty_iso3).

Conclusion

The trade war between the United States and China signals a profound change in international politics, as most people would agree, an unprecedented challenge to the Liberal International Order during the post-war period. Roughly seven years after the Trump administration announced the first round of tariff barriers, it has caused disruption in the global value chain, undermined the free trade regime, but, more importantly, it sends a message of turning from unipolarity to multipolarity. Clearly, state actors across the world need to adjust to it, not only economically but also politically. “How are they responding to it politically?” is precisely the question I am trying to answer in this research. By connecting the cause and the result of the trade war, the U.S.-China rivalry and the global trade diversion, respectively, I conceptualize two underlying forces that are persuading bystander states to engage with one great power: the former generates two conflicting views on the international order, with each side advocating for supporters, while the latter produces export gains that incentivize the bystander states to increase political engagement. Leveraging on a general-equilibrium model developed by Fajgelbaum et al., I estimate the tariff-induced export change for 44 bystander states, allowing for a shift-share design. The results, however, do not support what my theory predicts. Still, they reveal mixed patterns among bystander states and their political engagement with great powers. First, the destination-specific result suggests that the trade-war shock has the opposite effects on high-level diplomatic visits to China vis-à-vis the U.S. Second, bystanders are generally divided into two groups based on their export responses to the tariff: developing countries tend to increase exports to China, while developed countries see greater export gains to the U.S. Third, the two groups of bystander states exhibit distinct diplomatic responses to the export changes: the “China group” is consistent with the earlier destination-specific findings, showing a positive correlation between increased exports and visits to China, and a negative correlation with visits to the U.S. In contrast, the “U.S. group” aligns with the theoretical expectations presented in this research. These findings highlight the fact that political engagement with great powers is a complicated matter that, rather than a pure structural story, involves considerations of the inher-

ent political factors within both destination and origin countries. While I offered some speculative explanations for these unexpected findings, they also provide insights for future research that may help rationalize and better understand these patterns. Finally, with regard to public opinion, my result shows that when facing an export gain, how domestic voters view the destination country, China and the U.S., does not affect the outcome of diplomatic visits.

The limitations of this research stem from three places. First, as emphasized, the U.S.-China trade war represents a major turning point in the trajectory of international politics. Unlike the instantaneous response in trade diversion, political engagement involves more considerations and tends to demonstrate lagged responses. Therefore, a seven-year observation window, plus the interruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, may be insufficient to uncover the full patterns and long-term dynamics of bystander states' political engagement, not to mention that such change is still ongoing. Second, while accounting for the pre-trade war trend of diplomatic visits, variations may also be caused by an incumbent change within bystander states that suddenly shifts their political attitudes towards China and the U.S. Third, the limited availability of data on high-level diplomatic visits only allows for an examination of state visits that were undertaken by heads of state or government, while visits conducted by ministers can also signal change in political engagement.

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