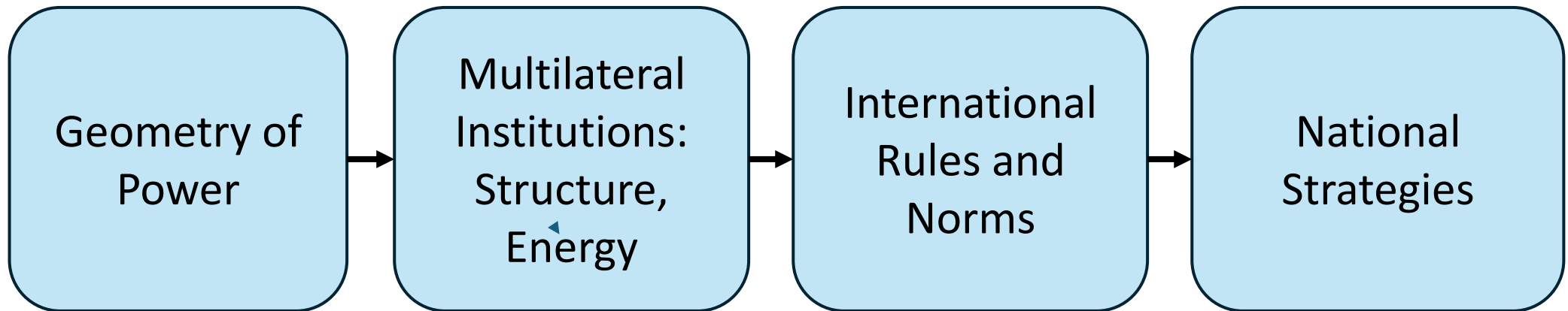


How Geopolitics Shapes Multilateral Institutions

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Structure of the Argument



Geometry of Power → Multilateral Institutions

Geopolitics		Multilateral Institutions	
Powers	Geometry	UN Political System	Bretton Woods
1950s Post-WWII: US, Soviet Union	Bipolar, adversarial	Gridlocked	Split in two; Western half effective
1990s Post-Cold War: US	Unipolar, cooperative	Expanded, energized	Consolidated, expanded, energized
2010s Post-GFC: US, China, EU, Russia, India	Multipolar, contested	Gridlocked on great power issues	Gridlocked on great power issues

Source: author.

Energized Multilaterals, 1990-2005

(case of unipolar, cooperative geometry)

UN Political System

- Gulf War (1990-1991)
- *Peace keeping (1990s)*: Bosnia, Cambodia, Mozambique, Rwanda, Kosovo, East Timor
- *Sanctions, tribunals (1990s)*: Yugoslavia, Iraq, Rwanda, Somalia
- *Environment*: Montreal Protocol (1989), UNFCCC (1992), Biodiversity (1993)
- *Human rights (2000-05)*: Mill. Dev. Goals, High Commissioner on Human Rights, Law of the Sea

Bretton Woods Institutions

- Post-Cold War transition (1989-1994)
- Marrakesh Agreement (1995)
 - Established WTO
 - Dispute Settlement Mechanism
 - TRIP, GATS, agriculture, textile quotas
- Added Singapore issues (1996)
- *Regional Agreements (1992-2001)*: Maastricht, NAFTA, APEC, ASEAN, China WTO Accession
- Debt Relief MDRI (2005)

China Becomes Great Power, 2008-

Economy

- Leading global exporter, second highest GDP
- Rapid climb up technological ladder
- Export- rather than consumption-led growth (trade surplus)
- Stands up to US in trade war

Military

- Second in global military spending (around 1/3-1/2 of US)
- Claims control of South China Sea
- Judged roughly on par with US in a costly battle for Taiwan

Policy Goals

- “Modern socialist state” by 2035, “great rejuvenation” by 2049
- Reunification with Taiwan
- Technological self-reliance
- State-led, subsidy-dependent development
- “Friendship without limits”

Emerging Multilateral Gridlock, 2015-

(case of multipolar, contested geometry)

UN Political System

- Some peacekeeping, sanctions continue
- Paris Agreement (2015)
- MDGs become SDGs (2015)
- US withdraws from Paris Agreement, reenters, withdraws; members miss NDC deadline

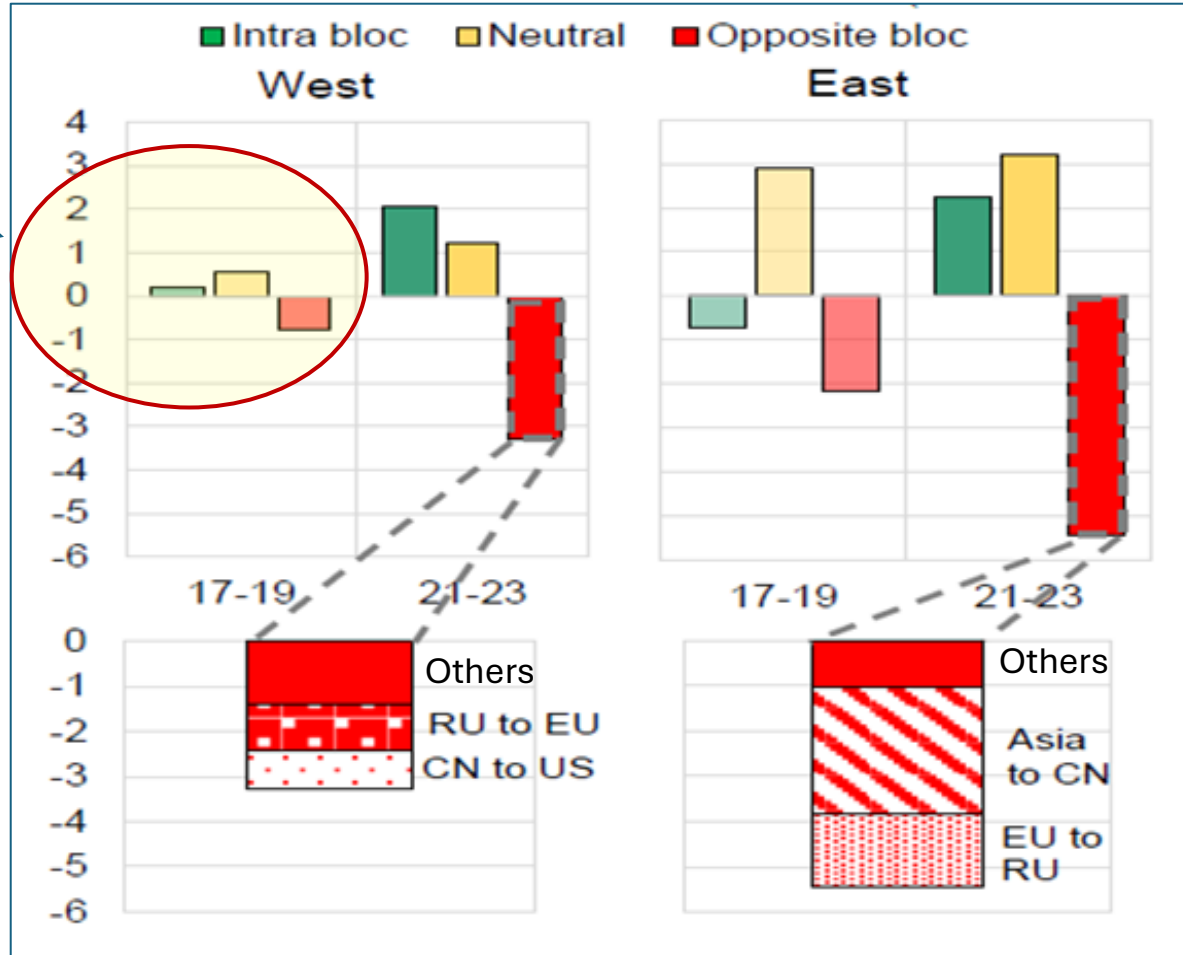
Bretton Woods Institutions

- Doha Round fails (2008)
- WTO Appellate Body paralyzed (2019)
- Progress on plurilaterals: E-Commerce, IFD, SDR
- Progress on RTAs: CPTPP (2018), AfCFTA (2018), RCEP (2020), EU-Mercosur agreement (2024)

Fragmentation is Underway

Bilateral Trade (percentage point changes in import shares)

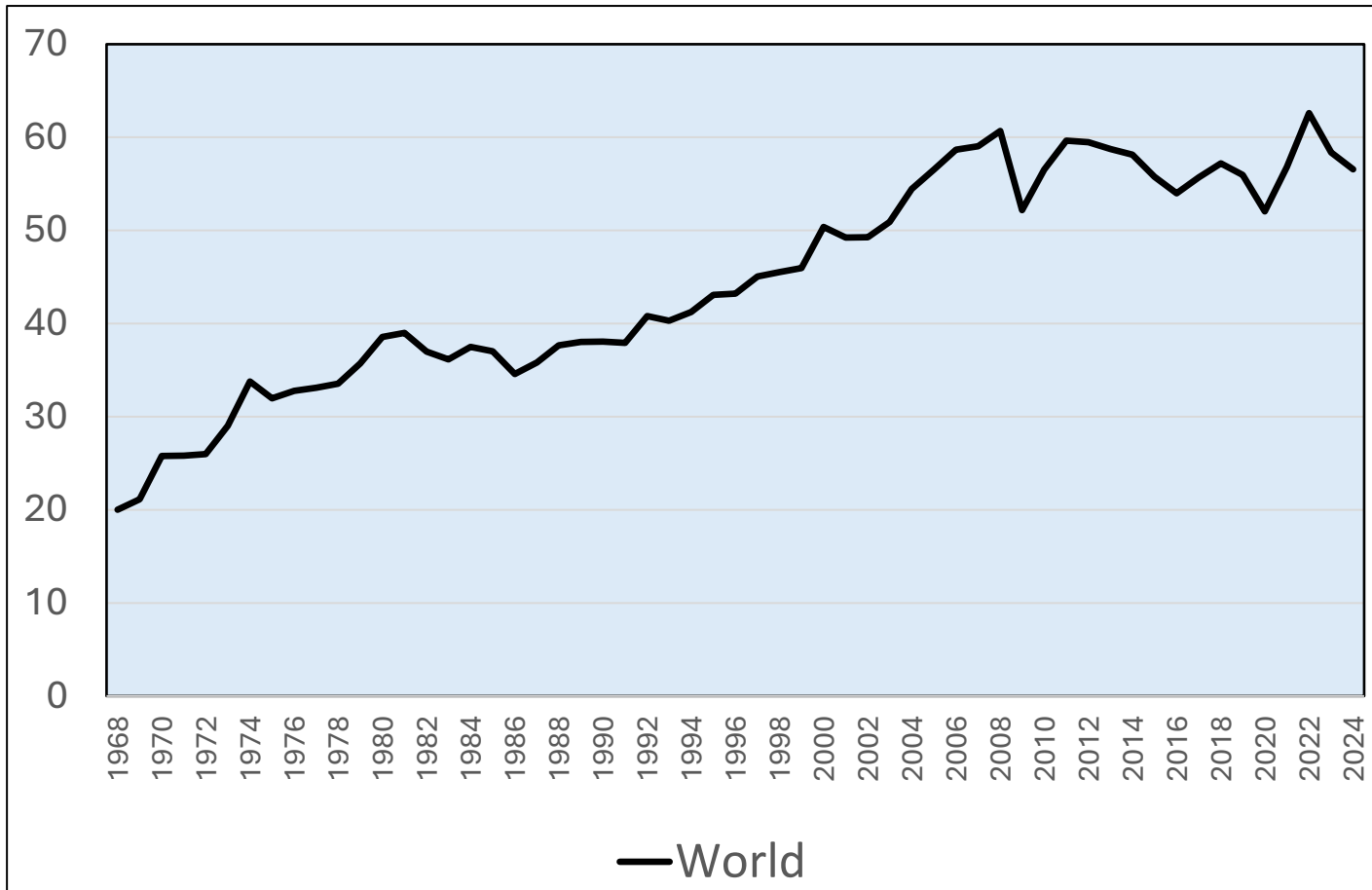
Western bloc imports, 2017-19



Source: Conteduca et al. (2024)

Is Globalization Ebbing?

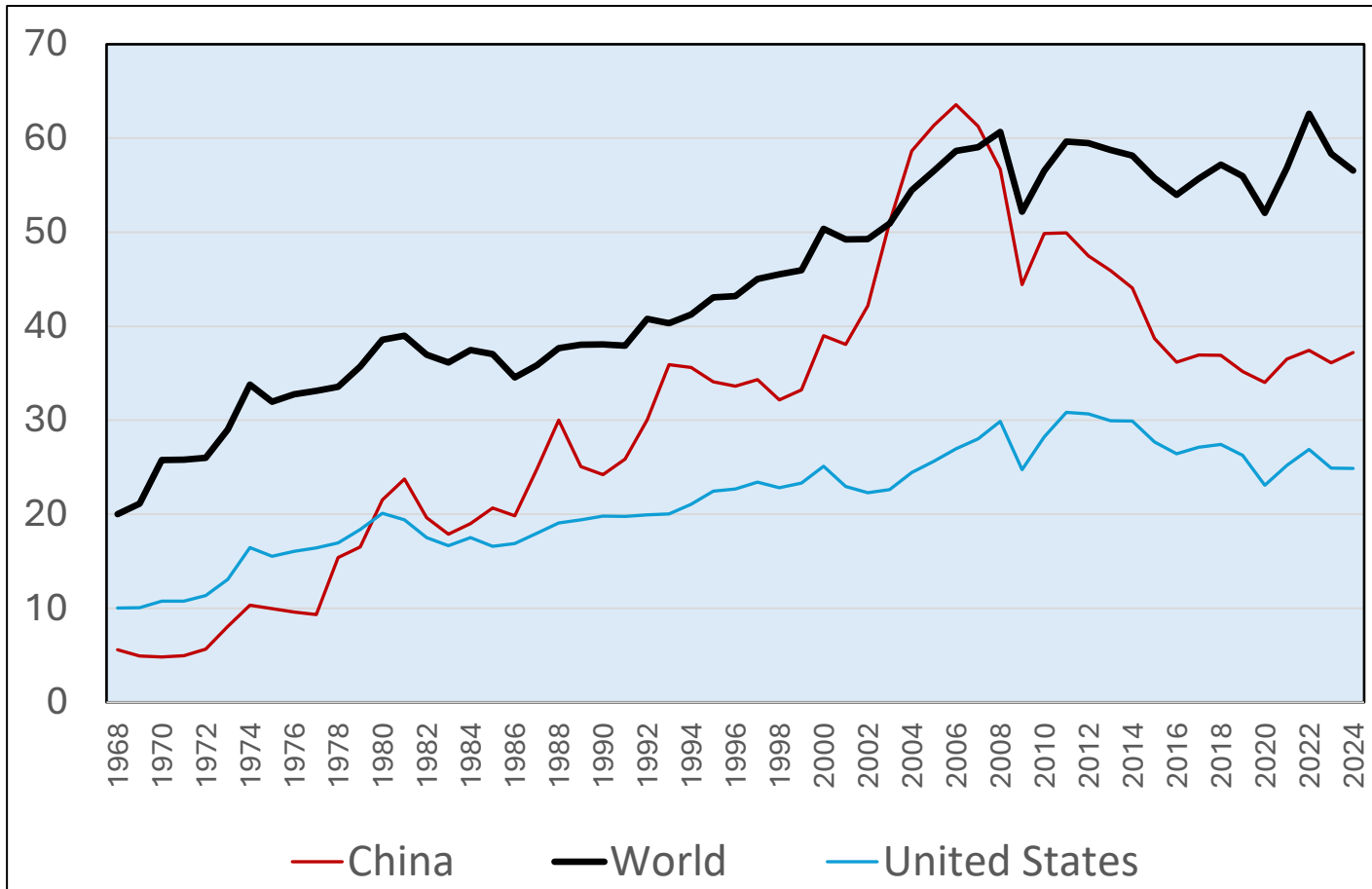
Imports + Exports / GDP (%)



Source: World Development Indicators Database (Accessed Nov. 2025)

Maybe for US and China

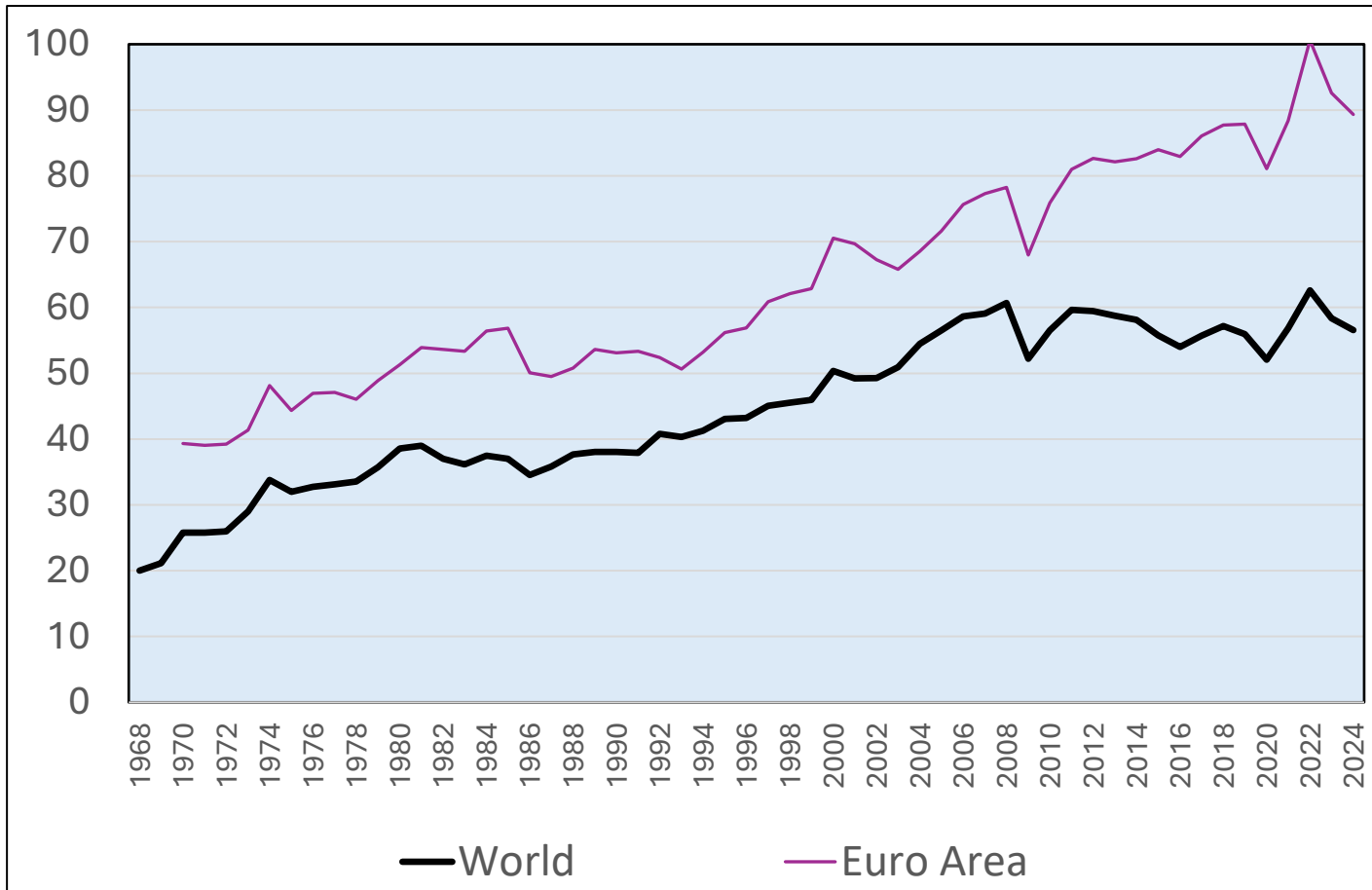
Imports + Exports / GDP (%)



Source: World Development Indicators Database (Accessed Nov. 2025)

But Not for All

Imports + Exports / GDP (%)



Source: World Development Indicators Database (Accessed Nov. 2025)

Roadmap: National Strategies

Join Plurilaterals, RTAs

- Join, initiate multilaterals: E-Commerce
- Join, expand RTAs: CPTPP, RCEP, ASEAN and EU
- Deepen cooperation within multilaterals, RTAs

De-Risk Economies

- Identify selective risk priorities, invest in “insurance”
- Diversify high-risk, high-impact imports/exports

Hedge Multilateral Option

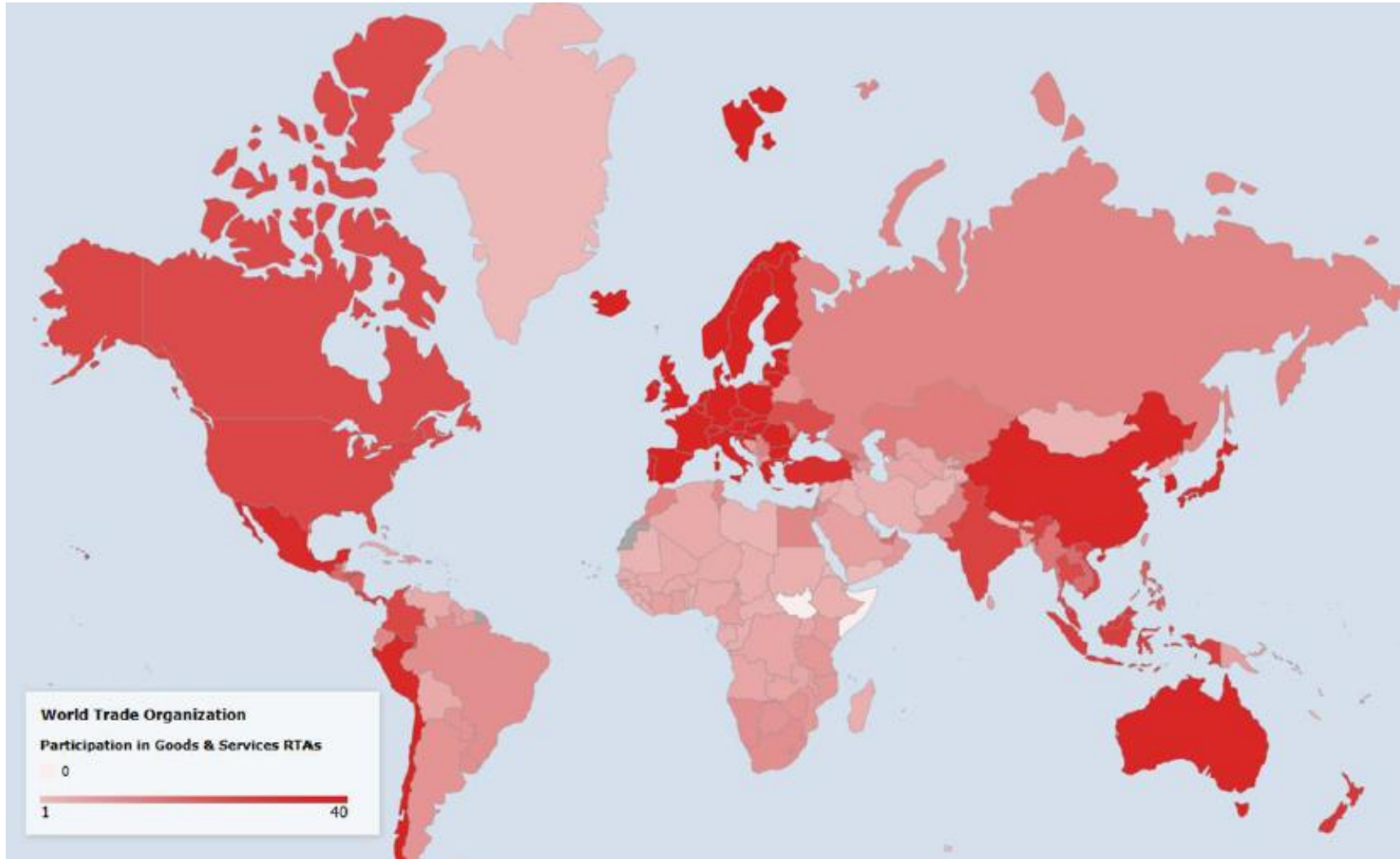
- Use WTO for dialogue, plurilaterals, data, transparency
- Join MPIA, use arbitration function

Concerted Results

- If widely used, these strategies reorient trade toward rules-based blocs and refocus attention on modern liberal rules

World Coverage of RTAs

(lightest: member of 1 RTA, darkest: member of 40 RTAs)



Source: WTO RTA Database (Accessed Nov. 2025)