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Case Study

Trade Sanctions with No Trade: China's Weaponization of Value Chains Against Lithuania

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Abstract

In late 2021 Lithuania came under trade sanctions from China in a crescendo of tensions that culminated with allegations of a violation of China's One China Principle. As the bilateral relationship is very small, China blocked all trade – direct and indirect – originating from Lithuania, weaponizing inbound value chains. In the aftermath, Lithuania's direct exports to China dropped by nearly 70%, and indirect exports – embedded in third countries' shipments and more difficult to control – by over 10%. Analysis of selected benchmarks suggests that the drop is unrelated to broader economic trends. Despite their economic impact, China's sanctions have so far failed to change Lithuania's course. This episode represents a significant escalation in the logic of weaponized interdependence and a demonstration of China's evolving capacity to exploit it.

Keywords: Economic coercion, trade sanctions, value-chain weaponization, weaponized interdependence, indirect exports, global value chains, Lithuania, China, Taiwan, European Union
JEL classification: F13, F14, F51, F52, C67

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1. Introduction and Context

In late 2021, Lithuania came under trade sanctions from China. In the context of a broader deterioration in Sino-Western relations, Beijing accused Vilnius of violating the One China Principle by allowing Taiwan to open a "Taiwanese Representative Office" in the Lithuanian capital, which China interpreted as implying recognition of Taiwan's statehood.[1]

As trade between Lithuania and China is extremely small, China blocked imports of all goods originating from Lithuania, whether directly or indirectly.[2] In this case study we discuss the evolution that this episode demonstrates in China's ability to identify economic pressure points in a globally interconnected economy and exploit them.

Lithuania is a small, high-income country in the Baltic region, and a member of the European Union and of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). It has a population of nearly 3 million and a nominal GDP of about €80 billion, roughly 0.4 percent of the EU total.[3] As an open economy, its trade-to-GDP ratio is 143 percent – well above the EU average of 92[4] – with nearly 70 percent of exports going to EU partners.[5]

Until 2021, Lithuania's economic ties with China were limited, with less than one percent of its exports going directly to the Chinese market. Lithuania, however, is believed to be a partner of relative geostrategic and economic interest for Beijing. This is owing, among other reasons, to its location – nestled between the Russian enclave of Kaliningrad and Belarus – and its EU and NATO membership (Andrijauskas 2020, 2022a, 2022b). Finally, Lithuania was part of China's 17+1 initiative, aiming to grow closer economic and political ties with central and eastern European countries (Szczudlik 2022; Andrijauskas 2020).[6]

Lithuania's diplomatic relations with China started to sour in 2019, when, in the context of a wider deterioration in Sino-Western relations, the country's intelligence

[1] China's One-China Principle asserts that Taiwan is an inalienable part of the People's Republic of China (MOND of the PRC 2023). The United States and the European Union recognize the Government of the People's Republic of China as the sole legal government of China, while maintaining their own distinct One-China Policies. These policies acknowledge the existence of Beijing's claim regarding Taiwan but refrain from endorsing it. For analyses of the U.S. and EU approaches, see Goldstein (2023) and Grieger (2024).

[2] *Direct imports* refer to goods shipped directly from Lithuania to China, such as laser equipment or dairy products exported from Vilnius to Shanghai. *Indirect imports* include goods containing Lithuanian value-added but shipped to China from other countries – for example, electronic products assembled in Germany using Lithuanian components, or furniture exported from Sweden that includes Lithuanian wood panels.

[3] Source: Eurostat, referred to year 2024.

[4] Source: World Bank WDI, referred to year 2024.

[5] Source: Trade Data Monitor, referred to year 2024.

[6] The 17+1 initiative is a China-led cooperation format launched in 2012 with Central and Eastern European countries. While initially focused on economic cooperation, the focus of the format progressively shifted to political and normative (Szczudlik 2022).

services publicly acknowledged Chinese espionage and influence activities in the country (Andrijauskas 2022a, 2022b).

In 2019, the European Commission described China as simultaneously a "cooperation partner, an economic competitor, and a systemic rival" (European Commission 2019). That same year, NATO declared that China's growing influence and international policies "present both opportunities and challenges" (NATO 2019; Cottey 2025). Against this backdrop, Lithuania's newly elected coalition government pledged a "*values-based foreign policy*," stating that it would oppose violations of human rights and democratic freedoms and support those "*fighting for freedom around the world, from Belarus to Taiwan*" (Andrijauskas 2022a).

Tensions between China and the EU escalated in 2021. Brussels imposed targeted sanctions on Chinese officials over human rights abuses in Xinjiang – the first such measures since 1989 – prompting retaliatory sanctions from Beijing (Emmot 2021). The European Parliament subsequently suspended ratification of the Comprehensive Agreement on Investment (Lau 2021).

During the same period, Lithuania also began to distance itself from China. In March 2021, Lithuania joined a statement criticizing China's conduct during the Covid-19 origins study (US Department of State, 2021). Two months later, the Lithuanian Government withdrew from the 17+1 initiative.[7] Around the same time, the Lithuanian Parliament passed a non-binding resolution describing China's actions in Xinjiang as "genocide", and – in line with Western allies – banned the usage of telecom equipment from "unreliable" manufacturers (MERICS 2021).

Tensions culminated in November 2021, with the opening of a Taiwanese Representative Office in Vilnius (MOFA of Taiwan 2021; MOFA of Lithuania 2021b). Owing to the complexity of Taiwan's diplomatic status, only a limited number of states formally recognize Taiwan (Herscovitch 2025) and its formal representations in most other countries operate under the name of "Taipei". The opening of a representative office in Vilnius thus marked the first instance of a Taiwanese mission using the name "Taiwan" within the European Union. This was seen by China as an implicit recognition of Taiwan's statehood in violation of the One-China Principle (Lau and Momtaz 2021; MOFA of the PRC 2021), which considers Taiwan an inalienable part of the country.

The event drew a harsh response from China, which withdrew its ambassador and "*urge[d] the Lithuanian side to immediately put right its mistake and not to underestimate the Chinese people's strong resolve, will and capability to defend national sovereignty and territorial integrity.*" (MOFA of the PRC 2021). In response, the Lithuanian

[7] The decision came both in reaction to concerns over the divisive nature of the initiative and in recognition of the lack of tangible benefits (Andrijaukas 2022a).

Government reaffirmed its adherence to the One-China Policy,[8] while maintaining its right "*to expand cooperation with Taiwan and to accept and establish non-diplomatic missions*" and the economic nature of the engagement with Taiwan (Lau and Momtaz 2021; MOFA of Lithuania 2021a).[9]

Chinese trade sanctions followed shortly after (see Table 1 and 2).[10] Although China's response was sparked by the naming of the Taiwan office, the sharpness of the reaction seems to suggest that more was at play. First, Lithuania was already on a divergent path from China. Second, Lithuania and Taiwan were building closer ties. Third China's reaction was arguably meant to send a broader message (Andrijauskas 2022a).

TABLE 1. Actor Table

Actor Name	Actor Type	Role	Position/Action Taken
Lithuania	State	Sanctions Target	Allowed the establishment of a Taiwanese Representative Office in Vilnius
China	State	Sanctions Sender	Banned the import of goods of Lithuanian origin

Note: Actor type and role classifications are assigned by the authors for analytical purposes. "Sanctions Sender" and "Sanctions Target" describe each actor's role in the coercion episode, not formal legal status.
Source: Authors' compilation and analysis based on official institutional sources and sources cited in the article.

TABLE 2. Timeline

Date	Actor	Action/Response	Source
July 20, 2021	Lithuania	Announced that Taiwan would open its representative office in Lithuania.	Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Lithuania, 2021
November 18, 2021	Taiwan	The Taiwanese Representative Office in Lithuania commenced operation.	Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of China (Taiwan), 2021

[8] Lithuania's position was confirmed in line with the EU One-China Policy by the EU Commission and Council (European Commission and European Council 2021). For the distinction between China's Once-China Principle and the EU's One-China Policy see footnote 1. For a discussion of the EU One-China Policy in relation to Lithuania's choice see also Vitiello (2023).

[9] Although Lithuania's choice reflected the government's values-based foreign policy and aligned with broader trends in Sino-EU relations, domestic support was mixed. President Nausėda later argued that the choice of the name "Taiwanese Representative Office" had been a mistake, while polls indicated that most Lithuanians did not support the Government's policy on China (Andrijauskas 2022a).

[10] Amid deteriorating bilateral relations, China was already exerting forms of economic pressure on Lithuania before this incident (Andrijauskas 2022a). However, the sanctions introduced in late 2021 were unprecedented in scope and are therefore the only focus of this case study.

TABLE 2. *Continued*

Date	Actor	Action/Response	Source
November 21, 2021	China	Withdrew its ambassador from Lithuania.	Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the People's Republic of China, 2021
November 21, 2021	China	Ban on imports of goods of Lithuanian origin.	European Commission, 2022

Note: The table identifies selected diplomatic and trade-related events most relevant to the case analysis. It is not intended as an exhaustive chronology. Event selection and characterization are assigned by the authors for analytical purposes.
Source: Authors' compilation and analysis based on official institutional sources and sources cited in the article.

2. Enter Sanctions, With a Twist

As a result of the fallout, China blocked the import of goods of Lithuanian origin. The ban, initially unofficial, was formalized in February 2022 (European Commission 2022). As China only absorbed less than one percent of Lithuania's exports, direct bilateral trade provided limited leverage. China, however, also blocked indirect imports, that is: import of goods which embed Lithuanian content regardless of where they were shipped from. As the Baltic country is an integral part of EU value chains, the indirect export ban reverberated downstream, causing hold-ups for multiple major EU companies.

Lithuania's high-tech manufacturing exports illustrate the different effects of China's direct and indirect export bans. In the immediate aftermath, direct exports of high-tech lasers – one of Lithuania's main products sold to China – came to a near halt (LRT 2022). At the same time, the German Business Federation BDI warned of disruptions to German exports to China containing Lithuanian components, which affected major manufacturers such as Siemens, Bosch, and Continental. (Hyndle-Hussein and Jakóbowski 2021).

Trade sanctions were further compounded by pressures on multinational companies to root out Lithuania from their supply chains (O'Donnell and Sytas 2021; Sytas and O'Donnell 2021). This caused stress, as major companies had shifted production to the country. Continental, for instance, had only started production in an advanced automotive parts facility – reportedly the largest single greenfield investment in the country (Continental 2018).

As a result, pressure from the private sector piled on the Lithuanian Government (Barros and Sikora 2022). Notably, the German-Baltic Chamber of Commerce urged Lithuania's foreign and economy ministers to seek a "*constructive solution*" as "*the basic* *business model of the companies is in question and some ... will have no other choice than to shut down production*" (Sytas and O'Donnell 2022).[11]

According to the 2022 European Commission filing at the WTO, "*Beginning in or around the final quarter of 2021, importers of products originating in Lithuania and/or transiting through Lithuanian ports and/or with some other link to Lithuania began encountering restrictions on securing customs clearance for their goods to enter Chinese territory. Those restrictions include in particular: (i) error messages on the IT systems used to [...]to secure customs clearance [...]; (ii) containers being blocked in Chinese ports pending customs clearance; (iii) failures on the part of the Chinese customs authorities to process requests for customs clearance in due time or at all.*" (European Commission 2022)

China's move, which, to the best of our knowledge constitutes the first instance of weaponization of inbound supply chains, significantly increased its leverage. The magnifying effect of international value chains is illustrated by an accounting exercise.

Measuring the Lithuanian content in China's imports is far from straightforward, as it requires consideration of the entire structure of global value chains. Inter-Country Input-Output Tables and appropriate accounting frameworks make it possible to trace Lithuanian inputs as they move – often indirectly – through complex international production networks en-route to China.[12]

Armed with these tools, it is possible to show that, in 2021, Lithuanian value added exported to China amounted to just about USD 500 million,[13] whereas global value chains routed an additional USD 1,046 million of Lithuanian products to China indirectly, via third-country exports. Thus, once these indirect flows are accounted for, Lithuania's total value-added exports to China rise to USD 1.55 billion: nearly three times the value of its directly exported value-added.

This exercise shows that expanding the reach of its economic measures to indirect exports, China increased threefold the theoretical surface of attack on Lithuania's economy. This not only increased the economic costs to the country, but also caused

[11] It should be noted that the position of the private sector was not unanimous. The German Business Federation BDI criticized China's actions as a "*devastating own goal*" adding that "*any damage to the value chains that are at the heart of the EU single market, is not to be tolerated.* (Miller et al. 2021).

[12] We use the Asian Development Bank Multi-Regional Input-Output Tables, which are provided in constant prices and represent one of the most up-to-date Inter-Country Input-Output databases available for research. The accounting framework follows Borin and Mancini (2023) and is implemented using the *icio* Stata package (Belotti et al. 2023). Indirect flows are obtained by tracing the Lithuanian value-added directly and indirectly embedded in other countries' exports to China, taking into account the full structure of global value chains through the so-called Leontief inverse matrix (see Borin and Mancini (2023), Appendix A for further details). While input-output tables are the appropriate and only tool for tracing indirect trade flows, it is important to note that the assumptions underlying their construction tend to make the foreign content of a country's exports uniform across destination countries for a given sector.

[13] This figure reflects the fact that in 2021 Lithuania's bilateral exports to China totaled USD 833 million, but approximately one-third of this value consisted of foreign inputs embedded in Lithuanian products.

fallout on "innocent bystanders", thereby intensifying political pressure on Lithuania to change course.

3. Impact and Consequences

The trade sanctions had a severe impact on Lithuania's exports to China. Between 2021 and 2022 direct exports of goods fell by 69 percent in real terms, while indirect exports of Lithuanian products reaching China through other countries' exports fell by 11 percent (Table 3). The much smaller drop in indirect flows might reflect the inherent difficulty in identifying and restricting value added embedded in third-country exports. Unlike direct trade, these flows are harder to trace and control, making enforcement of sanctions at the border significantly more complex and less effective.

As multiple other factors affected trade with China within the same timeframe, it is useful to assess this *prima-facie* evidence against selected benchmarks.

Regarding direct exports, between 2021 and 2022 global exports to China (excluding Lithuania) declined by 4 percent in real terms, while exports from the EU (excluding Lithuania) to China fell by 3 percent. On the flipside, Lithuania's total direct exports to the rest of the world (excluding China) rose by 12%, and its exports to other Asian countries increased by 1.5 percent (Table 3).

Turning to indirect trade flows, value-added exports to China increased by 5 percent both globally and from the EU (excluding Lithuania). In contrast, Lithuanian value-added exports to the rest of the world (excluding China) declined by 1 percent, while those to other Asian economies rose by 2 percent (Table 3).

TABLE 3: Variation in direct exports of goods and value-added in other countries' exports of goods, 2021–2022 percentage change, constant prices

		Benchmarks			
	Lithuania to China	World(i) to China	EU(i) to China	Lithuania to World(ii)	Lithuania to Asia(ii)
Direct Exports	**-68.8**	-3.7	-2.8	+12.1	+1.5
Indirect Exports	**-11.3**	+4.6	+5.1	-0.8	+2.4

Sources: Authors' elaboration based on Borin and Mancini (2023) and Belotti et al. (2021) with ADB Multi-Regional Input-Output Tables, constant prices. Notes: (i) Net of Lithuania; (ii) Net of China; Asia (net of China) is defined as Indonesia, India, Japan, South Korea, Malaysia, the Philippines, Thailand, Vietnam, Kazakhstan, Mongolia, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Fiji, Laos, Brunei, Bhutan, Kyrgyzstan, Cambodia, Nepal, Singapore, and Hong Kong.

In sum, the decline in both direct and indirect trade between China and Lithuania following the sanctions is consistently large and negative—substantially exceeding the variation observed in the selected benchmarks, which display mixed and generally smaller changes. The analysis offers suggestive evidence of the impact of Chinese trade restrictions specifically targeting Lithuanian products. It is however important to emphasize that this approach does not warrant causal interpretation.

Beyond their immediate economic impact, it is also important to consider the effectiveness of China's coercion in achieving its political objective: changing Lithuania's policy course (Baldwin 2020). Despite measurable trade disruptions, the measures were found to be broadly ineffective (Reynolds and Goodman 2023). This may reflect the limited magnitude of trade at stake – Lithuania's direct exports to China were minimal, and only a fraction of indirect trade was affected. But it may also reflect the support Lithuania received from EU institutions and partners.

In response to China's coercive methods the EU institutions and key Member States coalesced in defense of Lithuania (European Commission 2021; Vela et al. 2022; Płóciennik 2022).[14] In January 2022 the Commission opened a case at the World Trade Organization over China's discriminatory trade practices (European Commission 2022). Such a swift reaction is likely explained by the risk that China's sanctions posed for the functioning of the Single Market. Since its safeguard falls squarely within its mandate, the Commission was empowered to take swift action. The case of Lithuania also gave impulse to the adoption of the EU anti-coercion instrument (Szczepański 2024).

4. Concluding Remarks

While the Lithuania incident may seem minor in traditional geopolitical terms, it represents a significant escalation in the strategic use of weaponized interdependence (Farrell and Newman 2019) and a clear demonstration of China's evolving capacity to exploit it (Szczudlik 2022; Cha 2023).

Within the framework of weaponized interdependence, economic activity is conceptualized as a network of nodes and linkages, where certain nodes – due to their centrality – enable control over the broader economic structure. As states increasingly seek to leverage these structural positions, a shift is underway in the methods of economic coercion, away from the exploitation of bilateral ties and towards that of global interdependencies.

China has so far mostly exerted coercive power through bilateral pressure – restricting access to its vast domestic market – or by leveraging its dominance in the supply of critical upstream resources. However, reframing China's domestic market as

[14] Płóciennik (2022) notes that the German government kept a remarkably low profile during the dispute. While this may partly reflect the Commission's competences in trade policy, he argues that the more likely explanation lies in Berlin's significant economic exposure to China. Nevertheless, Germany did not oppose the EU's course of action.

a downstream critical node – at the terminus of global value chains – opens new tools of leverage. In the absence of meaningful direct economic linkages with Lithuania, China was in fact able to exploit international supply chains "in reverse," targeting what ends in its market rather than what originates from it.

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