Vol.1 No.1 2026
Pen of Global Politics
https://journal.penkreatif.com/index.php/pgp/index

Weaponized Interdependence Revisited: Trade, Sanctions, and Geoeconomic Power in World Politics

Tri Adianto[1]
[1]Faculty of defense management, Republic Indonesia Defense University, Indonesia
E-mail correspondence: tri.adianto3595@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Globalization has deepened economic interdependence across trade, finance, and regulatory networks, but this interconnectedness has also created new opportunities for coercion and strategic control. In recent years, sanctions, export restrictions, and network-based economic pressure have become increasingly central to the practice of power in world politics. This article examines how weaponized interdependence helps explain the relationship between trade, sanctions, and geoeconomic power in the contemporary international system. The study employs a qualitative research design grounded in document analysis and guided by the analytical framework of weaponized interdependence and geoeconomic power. Data are drawn from sanctions regulations, trade policy documents, official government statements, institutional reports, and scholarly works addressing network asymmetry, economic coercion, and strategic interdependence. The analysis focuses on key dimensions including network centrality, chokepoint control, dependency relations, institutional compliance, and the wider implications of coercive economic practices for global order. Trade and sanctions operate within the same structure of asymmetrical interdependence, enabling states with central network positions to convert openness into coercive leverage. Geoeconomic power is increasingly exercised through the governance of connectivity rather than through economic exchange alone. The article contributes to the field by integrating debates on sanctions, trade, and interdependence into a more coherent account of how networked economic relations shape hierarchy and coercion in world politics.

Keywords: Weaponized Interdependence, Trade, Sanctions, Geoeconomics

INTRODUCTION

Global political economy has entered a period in which interdependence is no longer understood only as a source of mutual benefit and efficiency. Trade networks, financial infrastructures, payment systems, logistics corridors, and digital platforms now function as channels through which states can exercise pressure beyond conventional military means (Poluhina, 2025). This shift has elevated geoeconomic power as a central concern in world politics, especially among states deeply embedded in global markets. The language of sanctions, supply-chain leverage, market access, and strategic dependency has become increasingly prominent in policy and scholarly debate. In this environment, the concept of weaponized interdependence has gained renewed relevance because it explains how asymmetric positions within global networks can be converted into coercive capacity. Major powers do not merely compete through territorial influence or military deterrence, but also through the manipulation of economic connections that others depend upon. The revisiting of weaponized interdependence is therefore necessary because world politics is increasingly shaped by the strategic use of openness rather than by openness alone (Obasun, 2025).

The central problem arises when global trade and financial integration, once associated with stability and interdependence, become instruments of exclusion, punishment, and geopolitical

Received: 01 January 2026; Revised: 05 February 2026; Accepted: 15 March 2026

bargaining. Sanctions regimes, export restrictions, financial blacklisting, and secondary sanctions demonstrate that access to markets and networks can be conditioned by political alignment and strategic vulnerability (Ruggi, 2023). Such measures affect not only targeted states but also firms, financial institutions, and third countries connected to the same circuits of exchange. The real-world relevance of this problem is evident in the growing use of geoeconomic tools to influence state behavior, weaken adversaries, and discipline actors operating across borders. These practices have consequences for trade governance, development strategy, alliance politics, and the future of globalization itself. They also generate uncertainty about whether interdependence still functions as a stabilizing structure or whether it has become a terrain of contestation shaped by unequal network positions (Ahram, 2022). The issue is therefore not simply that sanctions and trade restrictions are more common, but that they now reveal how global connectivity can be weaponized as a form of power.

Existing scholarship has already established that interdependence is not always symmetrical and that network centrality can generate political advantage. Research on complex interdependence, economic statecraft, and geoeconomics has shown that states may use trade, finance, and institutions to shape outcomes beyond their borders (Mulder, 2022). The literature on weaponized interdependence has further refined this argument by emphasizing how centralized networks create chokepoints and surveillance advantages for states located near the hubs of global exchange. Studies on sanctions have also demonstrated that coercive economic measures are often embedded in wider strategies of diplomatic pressure and political signaling (LaBelle, 2023). In parallel, work on geoeconomic competition explains how states use ostensibly economic tools to pursue strategic goals under conditions of deep globalization. These perspectives have made clear that interdependence can be a source of leverage rather than merely a condition of mutual gain. What is already known, then, is that global networks distribute power unevenly and that this unevenness can be mobilized for coercive purposes in international politics.

Even so, several important questions remain insufficiently explored. Much of the literature has concentrated either on the institutional design and effectiveness of sanctions or on the structural logic of network power, but less attention has been given to how these two dimensions interact over time (Özdamar & Shahin, 2021). There is still limited conceptual clarity on how trade and sanctions operate together as mutually reinforcing mechanisms of geoeconomic power rather than as separate policy instruments. In many accounts, sanctions are treated as episodic tools of punishment, while interdependence is treated as a background condition, even though the coercive value of sanctions depends precisely on existing patterns of connectivity and dependence. The broader implications for world politics are also underdeveloped, particularly regarding how repeated resort to geoeconomic coercion reshapes trust, alignment, and institutional expectations in the global order. The effects on middle powers, developing economies, and states attempting to hedge between rival centers of power remain especially underexamined. What remains unknown, therefore, is how weaponized interdependence should be understood not only as a mechanism of coercion but also as a process that reorganizes international order through trade, sanctions, and networked asymmetry (*The Uses and Abuses of Weaponized Interdependence*, 2021).

This gap becomes more visible when the issue is placed within an analytical framework that combines weaponized interdependence with a broader theory of geoeconomic power. Through such a perspective, trade and sanctions are not merely policy tools but institutionalized practices through which

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states govern access to strategic networks and shape the behavior of other actors. The research gap lies in the weak synthesis between studies of network asymmetry and analyses of sanctions politics in the wider structure of world order (Preble & Willis, 2024). One strand explains how global infrastructures create chokepoints and dependence, while another explains how coercive economic measures are deployed in concrete political disputes. Fewer studies integrate these strands into a single argument about how geoeconomic power is produced, exercised, and normalized in contemporary international relations. A stronger synthesis is needed because trade openness and coercive restriction are not opposites in this context, but interconnected dimensions of the same strategic environment. Revisiting weaponized interdependence through geoeconomic theory therefore allows a more coherent explanation of how economic networks become instruments of political authority and constraint (Rasador & Cunha, 2025).

Filling this gap is theoretically justified because contemporary world politics cannot be adequately understood through a simple distinction between economics and security. Trade, finance, and network infrastructures are now deeply entangled with questions of coercion, hierarchy, and strategic rivalry (Rani, 2026). A theory-informed analysis makes it possible to explain why certain nodes of interdependence become politically valuable, how sanctions derive force from structural centrality, and under what conditions geoeconomic pressure becomes a preferred instrument of statecraft. This matters because the growing use of economic coercion is often described empirically without sufficient attention to the mechanisms that connect network position to coercive effect. Geoeconomic theory provides that coherence by showing how interdependence becomes governable and exploitable through institutions, regulation, and asymmetric connectivity (Vieira, 2023). It also clarifies why the repeated use of sanctions can have systemic consequences beyond immediate policy goals, including the erosion of trust and the acceleration of defensive diversification. The theoretical justification therefore rests on the need to interpret trade and sanctions as constitutive elements of power within an increasingly networked international order.

From this basis, the article is guided by several interconnected research questions. How does weaponized interdependence help explain the relationship between trade networks, sanctions, and geoeconomic power in world politics? In what ways do states convert structural centrality within global economic networks into coercive capacity against rivals, partners, or vulnerable third parties? How do sanctions operate not only as instruments of punishment but also as practices that reinforce or transform existing patterns of dependence? To what extent does the growing use of geoeconomic coercion reshape the meaning of trade openness in the contemporary international system? How can a synthesis of weaponized interdependence and geoeconomic theory improve understanding of hierarchy, vulnerability, and strategic behavior under conditions of dense globalization? What are the broader implications of these dynamics for states seeking autonomy, resilience, and room for maneuver within contested economic networks? These questions direct attention toward the political logic of interdependence rather than toward trade and sanctions as isolated policy events (Silva & Selden, 2020).

The urgency of this research lies in the rapid normalization of geoeconomic instruments in contemporary international affairs. Sanctions, export controls, investment restrictions, financial monitoring, and market-access conditions are now central to the strategic behavior of powerful states, and their cumulative use may alter the structure of global order in lasting ways (Oppenheimer, 2025). As states increasingly perceive interdependence as a vulnerability to be managed or exploited, the norms

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and institutions of economic openness become more fragile and more selectively applied. This makes the issue especially important because repeated geoeconomic coercion can encourage fragmentation, hedging, and the construction of alternative payment, trade, and logistical systems (Jin & Meng, 2023). The article contributes by clarifying how weaponized interdependence operates through the combination of network asymmetry and coercive economic practice. It also contributes by linking trade and sanctions to a broader theory of geoeconomic power that explains how connectivity itself becomes a terrain of political struggle. Such a perspective helps readers understand why the future of world politics will be shaped not only by military rivalry or diplomatic negotiation, but also by the strategic contest over who controls the networks through which global economic life is organized (Lim & Ferguson, 2021).

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative research design to examine how trade, sanctions, and networked asymmetry operate within the framework of weaponized interdependence in world politics. A qualitative approach is appropriate because the research addresses relational power, institutional control, strategic coercion, and the political meaning of economic connectivity, all of which require interpretive and context-sensitive analysis rather than numerical measurement alone (Sierpe et al., 2025). The analytical framework combines the concept of weaponized interdependence with a geoeconomic perspective on structural centrality, chokepoints, dependency, and coercive statecraft. This framework allows the study to connect concrete policy practices, such as sanctions regimes, export controls, and financial restrictions, to broader patterns of hierarchy and order in the international system. The design is suitable for this research because the main objective is to explain how economic networks become politically usable as instruments of pressure and constraint. It also works well because trade and sanctions cannot be fully understood as isolated events, but must be interpreted within larger structures of interdependence, institutional authority, and strategic rivalry (Lewis, 2015). Qualitative analysis makes it possible to capture the interaction between policy language, network position, and geopolitical intent across different cases and institutional settings. For these reasons, a qualitative design provides the most coherent basis for a theory-driven analysis of geoeconomic power in a networked global order.

The study relies on qualitative secondary data drawn from sanctions regulations, trade policy documents, official government statements, reports from international organizations, legal and regulatory texts, and scholarly publications on interdependence, economic coercion, and geoeconomic strategy. Data collection was conducted through purposive selection of documents that directly address trade restrictions, sanctions practices, financial controls, network dependence, and state efforts to manage or exploit economic asymmetry (Dzwigol, 2024). The units of analysis are policy discourses, coercive economic instruments, and institutional practices through which states govern access to trade and financial networks. The main analytical instrument is a document analysis matrix used to organize and compare recurring themes across the selected materials. The principal analytical dimensions include structural centrality, chokepoint control, coercive capacity, dependency relations, institutional reach, and implications for global order. Validity was strengthened by aligning these dimensions closely with the research questions and theoretical framework, while reliability was supported through transparent source selection, consistent coding procedures, and systematic documentation of the analytical process.

Trustworthiness was further ensured through source triangulation and the use of credible, publicly accessible, and institutionally authoritative materials to enhance credibility and dependability (Im et al.,

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2023). Ethical considerations were maintained by accurately representing all sources, respecting intellectual ownership, and, because the research did not involve direct human participants, informed consent and confidentiality were not required in a conventional sense, although all documentary materials were handled with academic integrity and due care (Bennett & Elman, 2007).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Results and Discussion section examines how weaponized interdependence operates through the interaction of trade networks, sanctions regimes, and geoeconomic power in contemporary world politics. The material under analysis indicates that economic interdependence is no longer treated primarily as a stabilizing condition of globalization, but as a strategic environment in which asymmetry can be converted into coercive leverage. Trade, finance, logistics, and regulatory infrastructures function not only as channels of exchange, but also as mechanisms through which states may restrict, monitor, or discipline other actors. This shifts the meaning of openness from mutual connectivity toward politically conditional access (Cha, 2023). The central analytical pattern is that coercive capacity is embedded in network position rather than in sanctions law alone. Such a perspective aligns closely with the introduction, which framed interdependence as a field of power rather than a neutral condition of mutual gain. Geoeconomic influence is therefore exercised through the governance of connectivity itself. The discussion proceeds from the premise that trade and sanctions are interconnected practices within a broader architecture of strategic control.

A major result concerns the political significance of network centrality. States located near the institutional and infrastructural hubs of global trade and finance possess a structural advantage that extends beyond conventional market size or military power (Ye & Zhang, 2024). Centrality provides visibility over transactions, influence over compliance systems, and the capacity to interrupt access to key nodes of exchange. This makes economic networks politically valuable because they can be governed selectively rather than universally. The exercise of geoeconomic power depends not simply on possessing resources, but on occupying positions that allow control over flows, standards, and enforcement channels. Such control can shape the behavior of targeted states as well as firms and intermediary actors embedded in the same circuits. In this sense, network centrality operates as a strategic asset within world politics. Weaponized interdependence becomes intelligible precisely because connectivity is structured asymmetrically (Abdullahi et al., 2025). Power is thus exercised through the architecture of interdependence rather than outside it.

The discussion also indicates that sanctions derive much of their force from pre-existing patterns of dependence. Legal prohibition alone cannot explain why sanctions produce disruptive effects across borders. Their efficacy is tied to the degree to which targeted actors rely on access to dominant markets, reserve currencies, payment systems, transportation infrastructures, and compliance-sensitive institutions. Sanctions become more than symbolic measures when they are anchored in networks that others cannot easily avoid or replace. This means that coercive power is produced through the intersection of legal authority and structural dependence. The political reach of sanctions is therefore conditioned by the wider organization of global interdependence. Where dependence is deep and alternatives are limited, coercive effect becomes more substantial. Weaponized interdependence helps clarify this relationship by showing that the material and institutional density of globalization creates the very conditions under which sanctions become geopolitically potent (Farrell & Newman, 2019).

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Trade openness and coercive restriction should therefore not be treated as conceptual opposites. The same networks that facilitate exchange also create possibilities for surveillance, exclusion, and strategic pressure. Openness becomes politically consequential when access is governed by actors capable of defining the terms under which participation continues. This suggests that globalization has generated not only mutual benefit, but also differentiated vulnerability. States and firms often remain deeply integrated in networks whose openness is reversible under conditions of conflict or political disagreement. Interdependence in this sense does not disappear when coercion is applied; rather, it becomes the medium through which coercion operates. The political economy of trade is thus inseparable from the possibility of coercive interruption. Geoeconomic power emerges from the capacity to transform ordinary connectivity into conditional and disciplinary access. This dynamic broadens the interpretation of trade from a domain of exchange into a domain of political authority.

These dynamics produce uneven effects across the international system. Major powers with high levels of institutional reach and market centrality possess greater capacity to impose restrictions and withstand retaliation. Middle powers may benefit from integration into global networks but often lack the ability to shape the rules governing those networks. Developing economies face even sharper constraints because their dependence on external trade routes, payment systems, and export markets reduces room for strategic maneuver. Firms and financial intermediaries also become part of the coercive environment because they are compelled to comply with sanctions and regulatory expectations originating beyond their own jurisdictions. This expands the scope of geoeconomic power beyond interstate relations alone. Vulnerability is distributed according to position within the network, not merely according to formal sovereignty. Weaponized interdependence therefore produces a layered political landscape in which access, compliance, and exposure are unevenly structured.

To clarify the principal dimensions identified in the analysis, Table 1 summarizes how trade, sanctions, and network position interact in the production of geoeconomic power.

Table 1. Trade, Sanctions, and the Geoeconomic Logic of Weaponized Interdependence

Analytical Dimension	Observed Pattern	Geoeconomic Implication
Network centrality	Control over key trade, financial, and regulatory nodes enhances leverage	Structural position enables coercive economic power
Sanctions regimes	Restrictions gain force through existing dependencies on dominant systems	Interdependence becomes a medium of punishment
Trade openness	Exchange networks create benefits alongside selective vulnerability	Openness is politically conditional rather than neutral
Institutional compliance	Firms and intermediaries extend enforcement beyond territorial borders	Regulatory reach reinforces hierarchy in global exchange
State positioning	Major powers, middle powers, and developing states face unequal exposure	Vulnerability and autonomy vary across network locations
Global order	Repeated coercive use of networks alters expectations of openness	Hedging, fragmentation, and adaptive diversification intensify

The table supports the broader argument by demonstrating that coercive economic power does not arise from sanctions policy in isolation. It is produced through the combination of network architecture, institutional reach, and patterned dependence. This is especially visible in the relationship between network centrality and compliance structures, where coercive force extends through formal regulation and private-sector enforcement at the same time. The table also clarifies that trade openness

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is not negated by coercion, but transformed into a conditional arrangement shaped by unequal authority. Such a pattern strengthens the interpretation that weaponized interdependence is not an episodic deviation from globalization, but one of its strategic possibilities. The inclusion of state positioning further indicates that the consequences of geoeconomic coercion are differentiated rather than uniform. Some actors can shape the rules, while others must adjust to them. The table therefore provides a concise representation of how interdependence becomes politically governable and strategically exploitable in world politics.

The discussion resonates with existing scholarship on economic statecraft and sanctions effectiveness, while also extending it in an important direction. Earlier work has long emphasized that sanctions are tools of coercion used to alter state behavior or signal political resolve. That literature remains valuable because it explains the purposes, forms, and limits of coercive economic measures. Yet a narrower focus on sanctions outcomes can obscure the structural conditions that make such measures meaningful in the first place. The present discussion places greater emphasis on how sanctions are embedded within networked systems of trade and finance that distribute power unevenly. This makes it possible to connect policy instruments to the infrastructures through which coercion is exercised. The result is a broader account of geoeconomic power that incorporates both state intent and structural advantage. Trade and sanctions become mutually intelligible within the same analytical frame.

The discussion also deepens debates on geoeconomics by showing that coercion is sustained not only through state decree, but through institutionalized patterns of global exchange. Geoeconomic power depends on more than the use of tariffs, export controls, or formal restrictions. It also depends on the ability to mobilize compliance, shape expectations, and exploit dependency within systems that appear commercial on the surface. This explains why private firms, banks, insurers, and logistics providers often become crucial intermediaries in the operation of economic coercion. Their participation extends the reach of state power across borders without requiring direct territorial control. The governance of interdependence thus becomes a mechanism of authority in its own right. Economic networks retain their productive function, yet they also become instruments through which political hierarchy is exercised. World politics is increasingly shaped by this fusion of market connectivity and strategic regulation.

The theoretical implications are significant for understanding the contemporary structure of international order. Weaponized interdependence gains analytical strength when it is linked to a broader theory of geoeconomic power grounded in asymmetrical connectivity, institutional control, and coercive reach. Interdependence should not be understood as merely a background condition that states either enjoy or endure. It is a political field in which access, visibility, and vulnerability are continuously organized through network position and regulatory authority. This perspective helps explain why repeated resort to trade restrictions and sanctions has consequences beyond immediate bilateral disputes. It reshapes expectations about openness, trust, and the durability of economic commitments. The global order that emerges from such conditions is less anchored in universal economic integration and more shaped by conditional participation and strategic filtering. Geoeconomic power therefore becomes central to the study of hierarchy in world politics.

An unexpected complexity in the discussion concerns the spillover effects of coercive practice beyond intended targets. Measures designed to pressure adversaries frequently affect allied states, neutral intermediaries, multinational firms, and smaller economies integrated into the same networks. This broadens the political consequences of sanctions and trade restrictions beyond the immediate dyad

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of coercer and target. It also reveals that weaponized interdependence can generate friction within partnerships as well as across rivalries. States that share security preferences may still diverge over the costs, risks, and legitimacy of geoeconomic coercion. Firms may comply with sanctions while simultaneously seeking to preserve access to multiple markets. Such complexity indicates that coercive interdependence is not reducible to a simple model of unilateral control. It operates through layered and sometimes contradictory relationships within a deeply connected system. The management of these spillovers becomes part of the politics of geoeconomic power itself.

Several strengths and limitations emerge from this discussion. A major strength lies in the ability of the analytical framework to connect sanctions, trade, and network structure within a single conceptual account of coercive power. This avoids treating geoeconomic instruments as isolated policy tools and instead situates them within the broader organization of interdependence. It also clarifies how formal regulation interacts with infrastructural centrality and private-sector compliance. At the same time, the discussion remains bounded by the complexity and fluidity of the contemporary geoeconomic landscape. Network positions evolve, alternative systems may emerge, and the meaning of strategic centrality can shift as states diversify exposure and build resilience. Document-based analysis may also capture policy logic more readily than the full range of adaptive responses across sectors and jurisdictions. These limitations do not weaken the core argument, but they indicate the need for continuing attention to how coercive power changes as global networks are reconfigured.

The broader relevance of the discussion lies in its implications for trade governance, sanctions policy, and the future of globalization. States increasingly face a strategic dilemma between preserving the benefits of open economic exchange and reducing vulnerability to coercive dependence. This tension has practical significance for policymakers seeking to maintain competitiveness, autonomy, and systemic stability at the same time. It also matters for smaller states and firms that must navigate a world in which access to global networks is politically contingent and increasingly securitized. Future research should examine comparative strategies of resilience, the emergence of alternative payment and trade systems, and the conditions under which hedging becomes a viable response to geoeconomic pressure. Greater attention is also needed to how repeated coercive use of interdependence affects institutional legitimacy and the long-term durability of global economic order. The politics of trade and sanctions now extends far beyond episodic disputes. It has become a central arena through which power is organized, contested, and redistributed in world politics.

CONCLUSION

Contemporary world politics is increasingly shaped by the strategic management of economic interdependence rather than by open exchange alone. The discussion has emphasized that trade networks, financial infrastructures, and sanctions regimes are now embedded within a broader geoeconomic logic in which asymmetrical connectivity can be converted into coercive leverage. Weaponized interdependence captures this transformation by explaining how structural centrality within global networks enables states to monitor, restrict, and discipline others through economic means. In this setting, sanctions derive their force not only from legal prohibition but from the dependence of states, firms, and intermediaries on dominant systems of exchange and compliance. Trade openness and coercive restriction therefore operate within the same strategic environment, where access is increasingly conditional and politically governed. The broader significance of this argument lies in showing

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that global interdependence has become a central terrain of power, hierarchy, and vulnerability in the contemporary international order.

The article contributes to the field by integrating the concept of weaponized interdependence with a broader understanding of geoeconomic power in world politics. Existing scholarship has often examined sanctions, economic statecraft, and network asymmetry in parallel, yet these strands are not always brought together into a single conceptual framework. By linking trade, sanctions, and structural centrality within one analytical perspective, the discussion clarifies how coercive economic power is produced through the governance of connectivity itself. This perspective refines the study of interdependence by demonstrating that global networks are not merely channels of mutual benefit but also institutional arrangements through which political authority can be extended across borders. It also strengthens debates in international political economy and geopolitical analysis by showing that coercion increasingly operates through infrastructures of exchange rather than outside them. Such an approach offers a more coherent basis for understanding how geoeconomic instruments reshape hierarchy, trust, and participation in the global system.

Future research should examine more closely how different categories of states and non-state actors adapt to the expansion of coercive interdependence. Comparative work on major powers, middle powers, developing economies, and globally connected firms would deepen understanding of how vulnerability, resilience, and strategic autonomy vary across network positions. Greater attention is also needed to the emergence of alternative payment systems, logistical corridors, and trade arrangements designed to reduce exposure to dominant nodes of control. Another important direction concerns the long-term effects of sanctions and geoeconomic coercion on institutional legitimacy, alliance cohesion, and the stability of economic globalization. Research that traces how regulatory authority, private-sector compliance, and geopolitical rivalry interact over time would further sharpen the analytical value of this field. Continued inquiry remains necessary because the politics of interdependence is becoming increasingly central to the organization of global order under conditions of strategic competition.

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