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PROTECTIONISM, INTERVENTIONISM, GLOBALISATION AND ECONOMIC REGIONALISM: THE IMPACT OF CUSTOMS TARIFFS ON AGRI-FOOD TRADE. COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS BETWEEN EU, MERCOSUR AND ASEAN

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Abstract

This research aims to comparatively analyse the impact of customs tariffs on international agri-food trade, integrating the concepts of protectionism, interventionism, globalization and economic regionalism. The study focuses on five key economies: the European Union, Argentina, Brazil, Vietnam and Thailand, representative of three major trading blocs – the EU, MERCOSUR and ASEAN. The main objective is to identify differences in tariff policies and assess how they influence market access, the volume of trade flows and the efficiency of preferential agreements. The research aims to: (1) analyze the level of MFN tariffs (both simple and weighted) by agri-food product categories; (2) compare the degree of trade openness between regions; (3) assess the relationship between applied tariffs and import and export volumes; and (4) construct a synthetic indicator of tariff protectionism, based on the distribution of tariffs by percentage intervals. The methodology is quantitative and comparative in nature, based on official data from 2022, published in 2024 by the World Trade Organization (WTO), the European Commission, ITC and UNCTAD. The composite indicator developed allows for a coherent and comparable quantification of tariff protectionism within the five economies, complementing the classic descriptive analysis. The results highlight significant structural differences: the European Union applies a selective tariff liberalization strategy in agriculture, while Argentina and Thailand demonstrate extensive protectionism in sensitive sectors. Vietnam adopts a dual model, combining interventionism with openness to multilateral trade partnerships. Brazil falls into an intermediate zone, with relatively protectionist policies, but compatible with regional dynamics. The composite score confirms these guidelines, providing a rough quantitative hierarchy. Therefore, in an international context dominated by the reassessment of trade strategies, including the recent decision of the United States to increase tariffs on strategic imports, the study demonstrates that tariffs remain relevant geopolitical instruments, with a direct impact on the structure of trade chains. The main conclusion is that preferential trade agreements can significantly reduce real tariff barriers, contributing to the stabilization and efficiency of global agri-food exchanges in an increasingly fragmented trade climate.

Key words: *custom tarrifs, trade, agri-food sector, EU, MERCOSUR, ASEAN*

INTRODUCTION

International agri-food trade is not only an essential economic dimension for the trade balances of states, but also a strategic factor for global food security. In a landscape marked by geopolitical tensions, supply crises and pressures on sustainability, trade policies are gaining increasing importance in shaping regional and global balances. In this context, customs tariffs constitute one of the most direct and visible forms of economic intervention, with the ability to encourage or limit cross-border trade [18].

Protectionism, understood as a measure to defend domestic production through tariff and non-tariff barriers, often intersects with economic interventionism, through which states act on the market for strategic, social or food security purposes [19]. At the opposite pole, globalization promotes trade liberalization and economic integration, while economic regionalism appears as an intermediate form, through which countries cooperate within trading blocs to defend their

interests, but also to stimulate intraregional trade [24, 25].

The importance of a comparative analysis between the European Union, MERCOSUR and ASEAN derives precisely from the different ways in which these blocs apply the aforementioned paradigms. The EU is characterized by a common tariff framework, regulated by the Common Agricultural Policy and supported by numerous multilateral and preferential trade agreements [3, 6, 12, 15]. In contrast, MERCOSUR – dominated by major agricultural exporters such as Brazil and Argentina – maintains a high degree of tariff protectionism, aiming to protect local value chains and strengthen economic autonomy [4]. ASEAN, through actors such as Vietnam and Thailand, adopts a mixed model: accelerated trade opening, combined with selective intervention measures in sensitive agri-food sectors [2].

In this context, the analysis of the impact of customs tariffs on agri-food trade becomes essential for understanding regional and global trade dynamics, as well as the constant tension between openness and protection. The specialized literature highlights the complexity of the relationship between tariff policies and the performance of agri-food exports, especially in vulnerable sectors such as meat, sugar or dairy. Several studies, notably those undertaken by the Joint Research Centre of the European Commission, suggest that free trade agreements may offer major advantages to European agriculture provided they are accompanied with protection and transition measures matched to regional specificities [8, 9, 17, 21].

The commercial ties between the EU and MERCOSUR, defined by an association agreement agreed but not yet implemented, aim to gradually liberalize customs tariffs on a wide variety of agri-food items. Despite the potential for more commerce, the pact raises worries about sustainability and competitiveness for European companies [7, 10]. In the case of ASEAN, trade agreements with the EU – such as the EVFTA (EU–Vietnam) or the treaty with Thailand – have shown that tariff reductions stimulate agri-food exports, in particular for rice, fish and tropical fruits [5, 23], but also pose challenges related to compliance with European sanitary and phytosanitary standards [8].

Thus, customs tariffs prove to be not only economic instruments, but also political and strategic means through which states and regional blocs project their position in global supply chains. In this context, the proposed comparative analysis contributes to understanding the fragile balance between protection, liberalization, regional autonomy and global integration [1, 13, 20].

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The research aimed to comparatively analyse the impact of customs tariffs on international agri-food trade, focusing on the trade policies of five representative economies: the European Union, Argentina, Brazil, Vietnam and Thailand. The selection of these countries reflects their membership in three relevant trading blocs (EU, MERCOSUR and ASEAN) and allows for a regional assessment of tariff strategies and trade openness.

Tariff and trade data were extracted from official reports WTO – World Tariff Profiles 2024, Access2Markets (European Commission), as well as from sources such as UNCTAD, ITC Trade Map and FAO [11, 14, 16, 22, 26, 27].

The research method is quantitative, based on comparative analysis, descriptive interpretation and construction of synthetic indices. The analysed tables include average MFN tariffs (simple and weighted), the value of agri-food imports and exports, tariffs applied by partners and the distribution of tariffs by percentage intervals.

To assess the degree of tariff protectionism, we built an aggregate protectionism indicator, which is calculated by assigning a progressive score to each tariff interval (e.g. 0% = 0 points, 0–5% = 1 point, 5–10% = 2 points, etc.) and then by multiplying the score by the respective frequency. The final value represents the sum of the weighted results.

The formula applied is the following:

$$\text{Score} = \Sigma\,(\text{Score}_i \times \text{Frequency}_i),$$
$$\text{for } i = 1...n$$

The result obtained ranges from 0 (completely liberal) to 7 (hyper-protectionist), and the scores obtained for the five economies allow a robust quantitative comparison between national tariff profiles.
The method was complemented by an analysis of the correlation between the level of MFN tariffs and the volume of imports, supported by economic interpretations and assessments of the efficiency of preferential trade agreements.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

For this analysis, the year 2022 was used as a time reference, as it represents the most recent year for which consolidated, and internationally comparable tariff data are available in official sources. Although the reports were published in 2024, they reflect the tariff structure applied in 2022, in accordance with the methodology of the World Trade Organization and other multilateral institutions. This approach is frequently used in international economic research, given the natural lags between the time of application of tariff policies and the time of official publication of data.
The selection of countries was made for comparative purposes, including three major trading regions: the European Union, MERCOSUR (through its main representatives, Argentina and Brazil) and ASEAN (through Vietnam and Thailand). They reflect different trade models: the EU – with a common and liberalized tariff policy, MERCOSUR, with an agri-food protectionist orientation, and ASEAN, with a combination of openness and selective protection. The choice of these economies ensures structural diversity, geopolitical relevance and access to harmonized official data, which provides the premises for a methodologically rigorous comparison.

Table 1. Average MFN customs tariffs applied to agri-food and non-agri-food products in 2022

Country / Region	Average MFN tariff total (%) (%)	Average MFN tariff agro (%)	Average MFN tariff Non-agro (%)	Total weighted average rate (%)
Argentina	13.4	10.3	13.9	10.3
Brazil	11.2	8.1	11.7	6.7
EU	5	10.8	4.1	2.7
Thailand	9.8	27	7.1	6.3
Vietnam	9.4	17.1	8.1	5.1

Source: own processing [28].

MFN (most-favoured-nation) tariffs remain a fundamental indicator of a country's degree of trade openness. A comparative analysis of the average values applied in 2022 by five relevant economies, representing the three major trading blocs (EU, MERCOSUR and ASEAN), reveals significant differences between tariff policies, in particular between the agri-food and non-agricultural sectors. The European Union, although applying an average general MFN tariff of 5%, maintains a significantly higher level in the agri-food sector (10.8%), compared to the non-agricultural sector (4.1%). This structure reflects the protection granted to sensitive agricultural products under the Common Agricultural Policy, in parallel with a marked openness in industrial trade. In contrast, the MERCOSUR countries, Argentina and Brazil, present a more protectionist general tariff regime, with average total MFN tariffs of 13.4% and 11.2% respectively, and the difference between the agri- and non-agricultural sectors is relatively small, indicating a uniform approach to protecting domestic production. In the case of the ASEAN countries analyzed, an interesting polarization is noted: Vietnam applies moderate tariffs in both sectors (17.1% agro, 8.1% non-agro), while Thailand applies an agri-food tariff of 27%, the highest in the sample, signaling a pronounced food protectionism. At the same time, weighted tariffs, which reflect the real impact of tariffs on trade, are much lower than nominal tariffs, especially in the EU (2.7%) and Brazil (6.7%),

suggesting the existence of preferential trade agreements and the effective application of reduced tariffs for a significant part of trade.
The tariff structure of these regions therefore confirms their general trade orientations: the EU as a liberalized but selective actor in agriculture, MERCOSUR as a balanced protectionist bloc, and ASEAN as a dual zone – with industrial openness and active agri-food protectionism, especially in Thailand. This tariff configuration has direct implications for trade competitiveness and strategic positioning within international agreements.

Table 2. Total imports and comparative sectoral structure in the EU, MERCOSUR and ASEAN in 2022

Country / Region	Total imports (USD bn)	Agri imports (USD bn)	Non-agri imports (USD bn)	GDP (USD bn)
Argentina	80.60	5.00	75.60	632.79
Brazil	272.30	13.10	259.20	1,950.00
EU	2,806.30	174.10	2,632.20	16,600.00
Thailand	302.20	16.90	285.30	495.65
Vietnam	352.40	32.80	319.60	410.32

Source: own processing [28].

The structure and size of imports reflect the degree of trade integration and external economic dependence of an economy. In 2022, the comparative analysis of the value of total and agri-food imports, in relation to GDP, provides relevant indications on the trade position and strategic priorities of the five economies analyzed.
The European Union (EU) is distinguished by a total import volume of 2,806 billion USD, of which 174.1 billion come from the agri-food sector, which represents approximately 6.2% of total imports. Compared to EU GDP (16,600 billion USD), agri-food imports are only 1%, indicating a relatively low dependence, supported by its own agricultural production capacity and the integration of the internal market. At the same time, the structure of non-agricultural imports, worth 2,632 billion USD, confirms the trade openness in the industrial and technological sectors.
In contrast, MERCOSUR economies, such as Argentina and Brazil, have a more modest share of agri-food imports: USD 5 billion and USD 13.1 billion respectively. In comparison to GDP, these numbers are modest (below 1%), indicating both agricultural self-sufficiency and restrictive trade policies in the agri-food industry. Brazil, with a GDP of USD 1,950 billion, is nevertheless notable for a total volume of imports of USD 272 billion, a moderate level compared to the size of its economy.
In the case of ASEAN countries, the structure is noticeably different. Vietnam, with a GDP of only USD 410 billion, imports products worth USD 352 billion (86% of GDP), of which USD 32.8 billion comes from the agri-food sector. This high proportion highlights a strong trade openness and a significant dependence on external supplies, particularly for agro-industrial raw materials. Thailand presents a similar profile, with agri-food imports of USD 16.9 billion (compared to a GDP of 495 billion), but with a more stable balance between trade and domestic production.
Therefore, the analysis of the value of imports relative to GDP reveals contrasting trade patterns: the EU, a balance between self-sufficiency and openness, MERCOSUR, agri-food autonomy and protectionism, ASEAN, deep trade integration and dependence on external chains. These structural differences explain, in part, the distinct approaches to negotiating trade agreements and managing customs tariffs.
Based on this distribution of import values, it is appropriate to test the relationship between the level of customs tariffs and the volume of trade. A frequently tested economic hypothesis is that reducing customs tariffs stimulates imports – hence, a negative correlation between MFN tariffs and the value of imports. The data analysed partially support this hypothesis: the European Union, with the lowest tariffs (especially for non-agricultural

goods), records the highest volume of total imports (2,806 billion USD). In contrast, Brazil and Argentina, with significantly higher tariffs, import only 272 billion USD and 80 billion USD respectively.

However, in the case of ASEAN, important nuances emerge: Vietnam, although maintaining agricultural tariffs of 17.1%, has total imports of over 350 billion USD. This paradox is explained by the country's role in re-exporting, integration into global chains and the existence of preferential trade agreements (e.g. EVFTA), which reduce the effective tariff applied. Thus, the tariff-import relationship is also influenced by other structural factors, and a simple numerical correlation must be contextualized economically and geopolitically.

On the other hand, the weighted average tariff more accurately reflects the real tariff policy, as it takes into account the structure of imports and the effective application of preferences. In this respect, the EU stands out again with a very low level (2.7%), while Brazil (6.7%) and Thailand (6.3%) maintain a more consistent real tariff burden.

An additional indicator used in the analysis is the ratio between imports and GDP, which provides a measure of trade openness. Thus, Vietnam registers an extremely high rate (imports of 86% of GDP), which reflects a deep trade integration. At the opposite pole, Argentina imports at a value of only 13% of GDP, signaling a low dependence on international flows, in line with its agro-export profile and restrictive tariff regime.

Therefore, customs tariffs influence competitiveness and the degree of trade openness, but cannot be interpreted in isolation from preferential agreements, domestic production capacity and the geo-economic status of each country.

Table 3. Volume of agri-food exports and preferential tariffs applied in bilateral trade

Exporting country	Main partner (agro)	Agro exports (million USD)	Simple tariff applied (%)	Weighted tariff applied (%)	Tariff preferences (yes/no)
Argentina	EU	7,166.00	15.80	5.40	Yes
Brazil	EU	20,528.00	15.20	5.30	Yes
EU	UK	46,789.00	14.20	13.60	Yes
Thailand	Japan	3,892.00	14.80	13.00	Yes
Vietnam	EU	3,634.00	12.30	2.80	Yes

Source: own processing [28].

Agri-food exports represent a strategic dimension of external competitiveness, and the tariff regime applied by trading partners directly influences the performance of the agri-export sector. The data analyzed for 2022 indicate significant differences between the five economies, both in the volume of agri-food exports and in the level of tariffs applied by the main destinations of these trade flows.

Brazil is the largest agri-food exporter among the nations evaluated, with a volume of 20.5 billion USD shipped to the European Union. Although the EU's basic tariff is 15.2%, the weighted tariff reduces to 5.3%, indicating preferential access afforded through trade agreements and sectoral exclusions. The same trend is visible in the case of Argentina, whose agricultural exports to the EU are valued at 7.1 billion USD, and the effective tariff borne is only 5.4%, despite a nominal value of 15.8%.

The European Union, as an exporter, sends agri-food products mainly to the United Kingdom, with a volume of 46.8 billion USD. Unlike the other countries, the difference between the simple tariff (14.2%) and the weighted tariff (13.6%) is small, which may suggest either a stable export structure or a limited application of the post-Brexit tariff preferences. However, the maintenance of a preferential tariff with the UK confirms the persistence of a privileged trade relationship.

In the ASEAN space, Thailand exports agri-food products worth 3.9 billion USD to Japan, and Vietnam exports 3.6 billion USD to the EU. In both cases, a significant difference is observed between the simple and weighted tariff (e.g. Vietnam – 12.3% vs. 2.8%),

reflecting the efficiency of free trade agreements such as EVFTA and AJEPA, respectively. This gap confirms the fact that preferential regimes have a direct impact in reducing trade costs and, implicitly, in stimulating exports.

Therefore, the combined analysis of the value of exports and the applied tariff regime demonstrates that the presence of tariff preferences is a determining factor for the competitiveness of agro-exporters. The greater the difference between the simple and the weighted tariff, the clearer the effect of the trade facilities granted under bilateral or multilateral agreements. In their absence, exporters would be exposed to a much higher degree of protectionism from trading partners.

The consistent difference between the simple and the weighted tariff applied highlights the efficiency of preferential trade regimes. In Vietnam, the decline from 12.3% to 2.8% clearly shows the benefits afforded by the Free Trade Agreement with the European Union, which permits the use of decreased tariffs for a wide variety of agri-food items. Similarly, Brazil and Argentina benefit from a significant reduction in the effective tariff borne in relations with the EU (from over 15% to almost 5%), a sign of the application of trade facilities despite the absence of a full EU–MERCOSUR agreement. These differences confirm that large exports are supported by the real reduction in tariff barriers, rather than the nominal level of duties.

The European Union, although applying high average MFN tariffs on agri-food imports (10.8%), itself benefits from significant preferential access to its partners' markets. For example, in relation to the United Kingdom, the weighted tariff applied is 13.6%, with only a slight reduction compared to the simple tariff (14.2%), which may reflect a stable export structure, but also a limited reduction in post-Brexit barriers. In contrast, ASEAN countries, especially Vietnam, benefit from significantly higher tariff access, which supports the claim that mutual market opening is essential for strengthening agri-food trade flows. The existence of a relationship between export volume and the presence of tariff preferences is supported by the data analysed. All five economies apply preferential regimes, and in all cases the weighted tariff is substantially lower than the simple tariff. This demonstrates that trade agreements, especially for emerging economies, represent an essential platform for integration into international trade networks and for increasing the value of agri-food exports.

Table 4. Agri-food tariff structure by product categories in the EU, MERCOSUR and ASEAN

Country/ Region	Meat MFN Tariff (%)	Dairy MFN Tariff (%)	Fruits and Vegetables MFN Tariff (%)	Cereals MFN Tariff (%)	Coffee, Tea, Cocoa MFN Tariff (%)	Total Imports agro (USD billion)
Argentina	34.5	35	30.9	34.4	34.5	5
Brazil	34.9	35	29.4	33.5	33.6	13.1
EU	11.5	11.5	4.5	1.9	3.1	174.1
Thailand	41.9	50.5	28.9	24.5	29.4	16.9
Vietnam	10.9	11.3	8.3	11.3	35.1	32.8

Source: own processing [28].

MFN tariffs applied at sectoral level provide a more detailed picture of each economy's trade protection priorities. A comparative analysis of the five major agri-food product groups reveals marked differences in tariff policies, reflecting distinct strategic orientations and domestic sensitivities. In the case of the European Union, MFN tariffs range between 1.9% (cereals) and 11.5% (meat and dairy), generally remaining below 12%. This tariff structure denotes a relatively liberal trade regime, but with moderate protection around animal products, considered sensitive for the internal market and the common agricultural policy. The low tariffs for coffee, tea and cocoa

(3.1%) correspond to the EU's status as a large net importer of non-domestic tropical products. In contrast, MERCOSUR (Argentina and Brazil) applies extremely high and relatively uniform MFN tariffs across all five groups – over 29% in each case, with peaks of over 35% for meat and dairy. This approach indicates a consolidated and generalized protectionism in agriculture, aimed at defending domestic production and controlling the agro-industrial value chain. These tariffs also partly explain the relatively low volume of agri-food imports (5 billion USD Argentina, 13.1 billion USD Brazil), reflecting the region's agricultural self-sufficiency.

The ASEAN countries present an interesting divergence. Thailand applies very high tariffs on dairy products (50.5%), meat (41.9%) and tropical products (29.4%), demonstrating an aggressive policy of protection of local agriculture. However, Thailand's agri-food imports are significant (USD 16.9 billion), which demonstrates both the need for supply for industrial processing, but also the application of preferential agreements that reduce the real tariff impact.

Vietnam applies significantly lower tariffs on meat, dairy, fruit and cereals (8–11%), but maintains a high tariff on coffee, tea and cocoa (35.1%), in order to stimulate domestic processing and value-added exports. The high volume of imports (32.8 billion USD) suggests an active integration into international agribusiness trade networks, despite selective protection.

Therefore, the analysis by category highlights distinct trade strategies: EU moderate protection, oriented towards animal products; MERCOSUR generalized protection, self-sufficiency; ASEAN extreme protection in strategic sectors (e.g. dairy, meat).

This tariff arrangement has a direct impact on the typology of trade exchanges and the positioning of each region in the global agrifood system.

Table 5. Distribution of agri-food MFN tariffs by percentage range in selected economies

Country / Region	0% (duty-free) (%)	0–5% (%)	5–10% (%)	10–15% (%)	15–25% (%)	25–50% (%)	50–100% (%)	>100% (%)	NAV / Undefined (%)
Argentina	5	10.2	13.8	14.1	12.7	23.6	16.6	0	4
Brazil	10.9	9.1	53.5	21.1	4.3	1	0.1	0	0
EU	31.1	11.1	18.5	14	10.6	8.6	2.2	0.3	32
Thailand	13.4	11.4	8.3	0	10.5	46.1	8.5	1.8	11.7
Vietnam	15.5	17.8	14.7	10.3	17	22.7	1.8	0.3	0

Source: own processing [28].

The frequency distribution of MFN tariffs applied to agri-food products highlights not only the average level of customs taxation, but also the degree of dispersion and severity of the tariff regime. The comparative analysis of the five economies provides a detailed picture of the trade policies applied in the agri-food sector, highlighting the differences between protectionist and liberalized models. The European Union stands out for its relatively balanced structure: 31.1% of agri-food tariff lines benefit from a "duty-free" regime, while only 2.2% are taxed in the range of 50–100% and 0.3% above 100%. This distribution reflects a predominantly liberal tariff policy, focused on opening up agri-food trade, but with residual protection around sensitive products (sugar, red meat, dairy products). The presence of a significant percentage of "undefined" tariff lines (32%), however, indicates the complexity of the regulations and the existence of tariff exceptions or quotas. In contrast, Thailand is distinguished by an extremely protectionist tariff regime: 46.1% of agri-food tariffs are in the range of 25–50%, 8.5% between 50–100% and 1.8% above 100%. Only 13.4% of the positions benefit from zero tariffs. This tariff structure is a clear signal of the policy of defending the national agricultural sector, especially in the face of competition from developed economies. Argentina and Brazil, as members of

MERCOSUR, also apply a restrictive tariff policy, although in different ways. Argentina has a relatively balanced distribution, with large shares in the ranges of 25–50% (23.6%) and 50–100% (16.6%), which demonstrates generalized protectionism. Brazil concentrates 53.5% of tariff positions in the 5–10% range, but maintains a low component in highly protected areas, signaling a more uniform but less aggressive tariff policy than in the case of Thailand.

Vietnam adopts a mixed strategy: 15.5% of tariffs are zero, but 22.7% fall within the 25–50% range, reflecting a selective protection policy based on domestic agricultural and industrial development priorities.

The data analyzed support the idea that the degree of tariff protectionism in the agri-food sector varies significantly between the economies analyzed. Countries such as Thailand and Argentina apply a high proportion of tariffs in the >25% range, reflecting an explicitly protectionist agricultural policy aimed at supporting domestic producers and limiting foreign competition. On the other hand, the European Union has a significantly more liberalized tariff structure: a third of agri-food products are imported duty-free, and only a small part is subject to prohibitive tariffs. This policy favors trade and integrates the EU into global supply chains, provided that rigorous technical and sanitary standards are respected. In conclusion, the distribution of tariffs by range not only quantifies trade protection, but also highlights the model of agricultural development and trade openness adopted by each economy. High tariffs are not always synonymous with effective protection, but signal strategic choices regarding food security and domestic control over the agri-food market.

Table 6. Composite score of agri-food tariff protectionism

Country	Tariff Protectionism Score
Argentina	3.485
Brazil	2.022
EU	1.908
Thailand	3.641
Vietnam	2.725

Source: own processing.

The tariff frequency analysis allows for a synthetic assessment of the degree of protectionism in agriculture. Countries with a high proportion of tariffs above 25%, notably Thailand and Argentina, adopt clearly protectionist trade policies, designed to discourage foreign competition and support domestic production.

The EU, in contrast, applies a high share of tariff exemptions (31.1%) and maintains high tariffs only for a minority of products, reflecting a liberal but selective approach based on standards rather than taxes.

Brazil and Vietnam have hybrid regimes: moderate protectionism and concentration in intermediate tariff bands.

This assessment supports the idea that the degree of tariff protectionism is not only a matter of arithmetic average, but also of the structural distribution of customs policy across product segments and percentage bands.

To assess the degree of tariff protectionism beyond the simple average of tariffs, we constructed a composite index, which aggregates the distribution of MFN tariffs by percentage range, assigning a rising score to each tariff class. This methodology provides a synthetic measure of the level of trade protection, highlighting not only the severity of tariffs, but also their frequency within the customs policy. The results confirm the structural differences observed previously, namely that Thailand registers the highest protectionism score (3.641), due to the very high concentration of tariffs in the ranges 25–50% and 50–100%. This tariff profile denotes a clear strategy of protecting local agriculture and a restricted access for imported agri-food products. Argentina (3.485) also applies a protectionist tariff policy, with high shares in the ranges 15–50%, and a notable presence of very high tariffs (50–100%). Vietnam (2,725) and Brazil (2,022) occupy intermediate positions. Vietnam selectively protects certain sectors, while Brazil concentrates tariffs in the 5–10% and 10–15% ranges, indicating moderate but stable protection. The European Union, with a score of 1,908, turns out to be the most liberal of the economies analyzed, with a high proportion of 0% tariffs and a low frequency of very high ones. This score

confirms the EU's approach oriented towards tariff liberalization, but with specific exceptions for sensitive products.

Therefore, the composite tariff score provides a reliable quantitative measure of tariff policy and supports the general conclusion that Thailand and Argentina have the most protectionist agri-food policies, while the EU remains open in terms of tariffs, complementing market control through other mechanisms (e.g. quality standards, sanitary requirements).

In recent years, customs tariffs have been revalued not only as instruments of economic protection, but also as geopolitical instruments of influence and strategic pressure. The most recent example is the decision by the United States in 2024 to significantly increase tariffs on key imports from China, including in the technology, automotive and, in some cases, agri-food sectors. These measures were officially motivated by economic security considerations, but they have generated trade chain reactions, especially in Asia and Latin America.

In this context, international trade in agri-food products is once again becoming a field of manifestation of global political and commercial interests. The reorientation of trade flows, caused by increased tariff barriers, favors the consolidation of bilateral or regional relations, to the detriment of open global exchanges. Thus, countries such as Vietnam, Brazil or Argentina can become indirect beneficiaries of this reconfiguration, if they know how to capitalize on the new trade windows and adapt their tariff policies intelligently.

On the other hand, the volatility of tariff regimes directly affects the stability of international agri-food chains. In a sector already exposed to climate and food security risks, the sudden introduction of punitive tariffs undermines trade predictability, especially for developing countries. This is why multilateral trade agreements and stable preferential regimes take on additional strategic value.

Recent US tariff decisions amplify protectionist trends globally and highlight the need for countries to strengthen their trade resilience through balanced tariff policies, regional integration and export market diversification. The results of this research, which highlight differences between regional tariff models and the efficiency of trade preferences, thus gain increased relevance in a tense and unpredictable international climate.

CONCLUSIONS

In a profoundly changed global trade landscape, marked by the reconfiguration of international economic relations and the sharp return of strategic protectionism, customs tariffs are reaffirming their role as an essential instrument of economic and geopolitical policy. The United States' decision to increase tariffs on strategic imports and to privilege selective trade partnerships has accelerated a fragmentation of the global trading system, in which economic security, self-sufficiency and resilience of chains are becoming dominant priorities.

In this context, the comparative analysis of tariff regimes applied in agri-food trade by the European Union, Brazil, Argentina, Vietnam and Thailand provides a picture not only of distinct trade strategies, but also of the ways in which states and economic blocs respond to new systemic pressures. The research results show that unilateral trade liberalization is no longer a viable option, but must be replaced by calibrated policies, based on selective protection, conditional openness and strengthened regional integration.

Preferential trade agreements remain relevant, but their effectiveness depends on the ability of states to simultaneously respond to requirements related to standards, sustainability, traceability and food safety. Economic regionalism is becoming a strategic anchor, capable of ensuring stability and coherence in an increasingly unstable global trading system.

In an increasingly fragmented global trade climate, tariff policy recommendations must rationally combine strategic protection with conditional openness. The emphasis is shifting from pure liberalization to managing trade risks and strengthening regional partnerships, and customs tariffs are becoming an expression

of geopolitical positioning, not just domestic economic balance.

Under these conditions, customs tariffs must be seen not only as trade barriers, but as economic and geopolitical policy instruments through which states configure their resilience, food security and competitiveness. The use of synthetic indicators such as the composite tariff protectionism score becomes crucial for the formulation of agile and substantiated trade policies, in an international environment that is constantly reconfiguring.

This research therefore proposes not only a quantitative analysis of tariff regimes, but also a strategic framework for interpreting trade dynamics that can guide economic and institutional decisions in the global agri-food sector.

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