A network perspective on supply chain management in the structural reshaping of globalization

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Abstract

Purpose – The aim of this paper is to offer research highlights from various points of view the relationship between change in the international context, characterized by conditions of uncertainty, volatility, complexity and ambiguity, and, in some cases, by a real crisis in global supply chains.

Design/methodology/approach – The editorial proposes a review of qualitative works based on single and multiple case studies, as well as quantitative works, with reference to a variety of sectors and international contexts.

Findings – The research presents contributions on important topics such as the "reconfiguration" and "transformation" of supply chain structures. Reconfiguration involves processes such as the formation of the supply chain but also the development of new ways of exchanging information to improve communication flows between actors. The reconfiguration of the supply chain at an international level involves the theme of innovation. Some of the research proposes applications of models that can be traced back to the IMP approach.

Originality/value – The research presented proposes connections across sectors and the use of different methodologies on particular topics such as the role of time and speed, the importance of alignment between different components of the supply chain, monitoring the volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity factors of the reference context, and the contribution that the use of models belonging to the IMP approach can have.

Keywords Networks, International business, Supply chain management, Globalization, Decoupling

Paper type Research paper

1. Introduction

The relationship between globalization and the international distribution of the various components of value chains has attracted the attention of scholars from multiple perspectives (Harland *et al.*, 2003; Mudambi and Puck, 2016). In this special issue, we have examined the contribution that adopting a network perspective can make to the structural change that is affecting globalization processes.

Especially in the 1990s and 2000s, we witnessed the debate in literature on the characteristics and dynamics of global value chains in relation to the growing evidence of outsourcing and offshoring by companies in advanced countries with an increasing role of emerging countries (Gereffi, 1998). These dynamics have been particularly early in some sectors, such as textiles and clothing (Jones, 2006), leading to a repositioning of companies operating in traditional industrialized countries, with converging paths albeit with some specificities (Guercini, 2004). The relocation and redistribution of the stages of the value chain in different countries have not been confined to a few traditional industrial sectors but have also affected the most innovative industries based on the most advanced technology and heavy investment in research and development (Mudambi, 2007; Pyndt and Pedersen, 2006; Prud'homme and Von Zedtwitz, 2018).

Today, the reconfiguration of activities and actors in supply networks is one of the most current and relevant issues in the context of business-to-business relations on an international

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scale (Tunisini and Bocconcelli, 2009). This issue concerns the geographical dimension, in terms of reshoring or nearsourcing strategies (Fratocchi *et al.*, 2014), and the organizational dimension, in terms of outsourcing failures (Cabral *et al.*, 2014) and insourcing. At the same time, the leadership acquired by companies from emerging countries in various supply networks (Lechner *et al.*, 2020) calls into question the role of many leading companies from advanced countries, long committed to relocating production to low-cost countries and investing mainly in distribution chains, including at an international level (Guercini and Runfola, 2016). The reconfiguration of supply networks is also a factor that can mitigate the difficulties posed by the context and the sensitivity of the market and other stakeholders, with regard to, for example, the management of sustainability. The crises of recent years (pandemic, wars, etc.) have changed the balance and added other elements to the management of international supply chains (Gereffi, 2020). The analytical-interpretative tools of the IMP tradition can be effective in interpreting the changes taking place at the international level, in particular by adopting the perspective of the business network (Håkansson and Snehota, 1995). These tools can provide a methodological basis for interpreting the evolution of international issues experienced in this phase of change that some define as de-globalization (Witt, 2019).

In essence, we are witnessing profound changes in supply chains, not only in the actors but also in the structure and dynamics of the relationships that connect them. In the context of the study of internationalization processes, the IMP tradition has been recognized for its contribution to the study of internationalization processes with reference to the understanding of the liabilities of outsidership (Johanson and Vahlne, 2009). The interactions between the business networks have highlighted the opportunities offered by overcoming outsidership even when companies develop internationally. Moreover, in recent years, scholars have considered the liabilities of outsidership as superior to the traditional liabilities of foreignness in explaining the problems currently experienced by companies in the context of internationalization (Vahlne and Johanson, 2020).

The objective of this special issue is to explore current trends in international supply chains, marked by a change in the international context characterized by conditions of uncertainty, volatility, complexity and ambiguity and, in some cases, by a real crisis in global supply chains. This special issue of JBIM, therefore, examines the dark and the bright side of interaction processes in business networks in the presence of growing conditions of volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity (VUCA) in international scenarios. The next section examines the impact of these new scenarios on supply chains, while the following section presents the main results of the research published in this special issue. A final section focuses on some aspects and perspectives for future research.

2. The structural reshaping of globalization and its impact on companies international activities

The evolution of the international landscape, also from a geopolitical point of view, has shown a change, at first gradual, then more accelerated, in the context of supply chains (Benito *et al.*, 2022). The literature on industrial marketing has highlighted the development of extensive cross-border relationships in geographically diverse contexts, often characterizing customer-oriented supply chains (Martinelli *et al.*, 2017). This evolution is partly the consequence of the exhaustion of a decades-long cycle of increasing geographical diversification of supply chains, also due to the change in cost conditions in emerging countries. However, this evolution depends in large part on new and unexpected events such as the pandemic crisis or on the deterioration of relations between some countries in a changed geopolitical context. In fact, the geopolitical situation, characterized by threats of decoupling between the economies of the USA and China (Contractor, 2021), plays an increasingly significant role in the policies of companies interested in international supply chains. In this regard, companies with complex and geographically dispersed supply chains are particularly exposed. This situation of increasing volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity in the international context has been summarized by the acronym "VUCA" (Bennett and Lemoine, 2014).

The exhaustion of a long cycle of increasing global offshoring and outsourcing to new countries by companies based in advanced countries (Petricevic and Teece, 2019) leads to questions about the future of the company's global strategy (Benito *et al.*, 2022). Furthermore, digital networks also encounter difficulties of a similar intensity to those affecting physical supply networks, since cultural, political and structural barriers also reproduce themselves in the online context (Guercini and Runfola, 2015). Companies are called upon to configure increasingly resilient supply chains to cope with sudden crises (Tukamuhabwa *et al.*, 2015). Supply chain resilience should enable companies to deal with different types of events, allowing operations to be quickly restored to their previous level of performance or even to a new and improved one. A resilient supply chain also relies on new digital technologies, and companies can take advantage of these technologies in the reconfiguration of their supply chains. Added to this is the challenge today of rethinking the structure and processes of the global supply chain from a perspective of circularity and sustainability (Kim and Davis, 2016).

The structural reshaping of globalization (Petricevic and Teece, 2019) is often associated with terms like deglobalization and decoupling. In recent years, the international business literature has highlighted the rise of deglobalization phenomena (Witt, 2019) and its associated impacts, which bring instability and uncertainty to businesses. Deglobalization implies a decline in interdependencies among nations (Witt, 2019), opposing the globalization trends that defined the previous decades. This shift is characterized by escalating geopolitical tensions that compel companies, among other implications at different levels, to reevaluate their international business strategies. Deglobalization is often linked to a decoupling trend (Witt *et al.*, 2023), particularly evident in the growing geopolitical rivalry between the USA and China, but also between European Union and Russia and potentially between other countries or blocks. The decoupling between USA and China is driven by what some scholars call a new "Tech World War" (Tung *et al.*, 2023), significantly affecting international strategic (Petricevic and Teece, 2019) sectors like semiconductors and various technology fields vital for modern economic development. How businesses adapt and position

themselves in this evolving landscape is increasingly relevant in management research.

The processes of deglobalization and decoupling have prompted a reassessment of strategies, including divestment from foreign markets (Sethuram and Gaur, 2024). One notable strategy involves withdrawing from or scaling back operations in foreign markets. The literature addresses the inherent dilemma (Thein *et al.*, 2024), for example, faced by companies caught on either side of the decoupling spectrum (e.g. American companies in China or Chinese firms in the USA). Huang *et al.* (2024) posit that the political ties of multinational firms from emerging markets can act as liabilities in foreign development, potentially hindering or complicating internationalization during deglobalization times. In a recent study, Hou and Rui (2025) examined the impact of decoupling processes in the banking system, highlighting how a Chinese bank distanced itself from the American-led system. The rising geopolitical tensions impacting strategic sectors also affect firms from third-party nations. For instance, Gao *et al.* (2023) examined the responses of Taiwanese semiconductor companies through a coevolutionary lens, emphasizing the sequence of interdependent decisions driven by events at institutional and political levels between China and the USA. In the Ren *et al.* (2024) study, for example, the impact on Australian and New Zealand exporters in the current context of deglobalization. They stress the existence of two strategic alternatives followed by these companies: fencing and balancing, based on the decision that leans toward one side or the other in the trade conflict between the USA and China or toward third countries in the trade war between the two superpowers (Ren *et al.*, 2024, p. 661).

Furthermore, deglobalization trends contribute to the global relocation of manufacturing and sourcing activities. The reconfiguration of global value chains has received great attention in the current debate (Klarin *et al.*, 2024). The issue of "whether and where manufacturing is moving, expanding, or contracting across the globe" (Ellram, 2013, p. 1) has always attracted scholars. The phenomena of deglobalization (Delios *et al.*, 2024) and disruptive events, such as the recent pandemic (Lorenzen *et al.*, 2020), have led to renewed attention on location choices. In contrast to the phenomenon of offshoring, or the choice to locate manufacturing activities far from the company headquarters (Ellram *et al.*, 2013), attention has been placed on returning from distant locations and geographical proximity to the company. Trends like reshoring (Barbieri *et al.*, 2018) and nearshoring (Ellram *et al.*, 2013) have gained attention over recent years, and deglobalization calls for a major understanding of these phenomena.

To conclude, the international business literature explores the implications of deglobalization and decoupling, highlighting the instability caused by geopolitical tensions. It is crucial to consider how deglobalization affects international trade flows and business practices (Altman *et al.*, 2024). While many international business scholars focus on the difficulties posed by deglobalization and decoupling, some challenge this view by emphasizing the "resilience of international flows" (Altman *et al.*, 2024, p. 621), which questions the prevailing narratives surrounding these concepts (Altman *et al.*, 2024). This necessitates a more comprehensive understanding of how companies operate globally amid current conditions.

3. Contributions in this special issue

The special issue includes seven articles that apply either qualitative or quantitative research methods and focus on specific facets of supply networks by taking the recent phenomena connected to the globalization process – such as de-globalization and VUCA, to mention some of them – as research context.

The paper entitled "The role of key suppliers in network formation when reshoring: The case of a born-offshored company" by Enrico Baraldi, Francesco Ciabuschi, Luciano Fratocchi, Daniel Pedroletti and Antonio Picciotti (Baraldi *et al.*, 2025) delves into the topic of reshoring by taking an industrial network viewpoint for analyzing how initial key suppliers' relationships can facilitate customers' reshoring processes in the home country. To achieve their research goal, the authors – through the utilization of a single case study methodology based on a firm operating in the manufacturing industry – focus specifically on the *roles* played by a home country key supplier in the reshoring process of the born-offshored focal firm. The authors discover 10 pivotal roles, namely, technical developer, matchmaker, relationship bridge and initiator, contract manufacturer, assembler, contributor to value creation, network coordinator, strategy enabler, R&D collaborator and teacher. Moreover, through the adoption of the IMP-derived activities, resources and actors model, the authors examined the *effects* that the initial key supplier had on the formation of the reshoring firms' supply network in the home country. Clearly, the authors show that the key supplier affected the creation of new supplier relationships, enhanced the coordination of new and existent business actors and contributed to a better access to key and relevant resources such as competencies and machineries.

The paper written by Cinti *et al.* (2025) entitled "Enhancing Supply Chain Resilience Through the Supply Network Approach" deals with the topic of supply network and resilience. The goal of their work is to better understand how firms have reacted and adapted to global crisis – such as the COVID-19 pandemic – by enhancing the supply network resilience. The authors contribute by offering empirical insights within this topic by taking an interorganizational perspective and by relying on a multiple case study approach. The theoretical point of departure is posit at the intersection between supply chain resilience studies and supply network IMP perspective, the result is that the authors have elaborated a framework for investigating – at network level – the resilience phenomenon by taking five dimensions: supply network structure, interdependencies, coordination/collaboration, positioning and temporary organizing. By adopting a multiple case study approach, the authors show that once a shock/crisis happens, firms react fast in the short term by interacting with key actors within the supply network. These interaction patterns influence how firms would build new supplier relationships as well as consolidate the already established ones. Therefore, the resilience of supply chains would depend on how firms react in short term with their counterparts but also on how they deal with the interdependencies within the business network in the long run.

The paper presented by Belvedere *et al.* (2025), entitled "Environmental sustainability and information sharing related

to delivery options in the B2B2C context of e-commerce: evidence from a survey," deals with sustainability, logistics and supply chain. In the beginning of the paper, the authors point out that there is an increasing attention toward physical distribution forms in e-commerce witnessed by the large investments that logistics operators are developing within the so-called last-mile solutions such as parcel lockers. What the authors consider still missing is a comprehensive analysis about the willingness of customers in using eco-friendly delivery options and their impacts in terms of communication along the supply network. More specifically, through a survey-based study, the authors identify that performances of the technological solution, social environment, pleasure and anxiety to use the solution are important triggers to adopt the parcel lockers: pricing does not seem to affect the customers' decisions. On the other hand, the study shows that customers would expect to get from the supply network actors a rather accurate level of information concerning the effectiveness of the solution from an environmental perspective.

The paper entitled "Digital transformation and sustainable performance: The mediating role of triple-A supply chain capabilities" developed by Mohaghegh *et al.* (2025) explores how digital transformation (DT) would enhance sustainable performance within the pharmaceutical supply chain (PSC). The study is contextualized in the so called VUCA context, and the authors study which of the triple-A supply chain capabilities – that are agility, adaptability and alignment – can effectively transfer the effects of DT on the sustainable performance. Through the adoption of a quantitative research approach, the authors show that DT affects positively sustainable performance of companies through supply chain agility and alignment. Supply chain adaptability would instead require long-term modifications of PSC, which contrast with DT that involves quick implementation of digital tools. Clearly, the authors emphasized time as a relevant variable in shaping the supply chain sustainable performances. In addition, it becomes central to orchestrate capabilities and resources not in isolation for reaching promising results in both short and long run.

The paper written by Rovai (2025), "Building business network relationships in the changing Chinese context: findings from Italian luxury companies" concerns deglobalization and its effects in the case of new market entering. The used multiple case study approach was based on Italian companies operating in the fashion industry and aimed to enter into the Chinese market. The capability of building business relationships and engaging with multiple local actors is showed to be central; moreover, the authors discover that a certain level of dynamism would be required when building new relationships. Local actors might include representatives from the local Chinese government when dealing with foreign companies; this would consequently have direct effects on the complexity of building trust while interacting.

The paper by Lin *et al.* (2025) is entitled "Speed Matters for Supply Chain Communication to Acquire Superior Firm Performance: Carbon Footprint Communication," and it deals with the upstream and downstream communication process within supply chains. "Speed" of the communication within the supply chain is taken as the specific variable that the authors bring to the fore: the rationale behind this study is the willingness to study the specific speed of carbon footprint communication. The study is anchored within the context of sustainability and VUCA, and it tries to capture the impact of the speed of communication by applying a quantitative approach, taking retailing as empirical setting. The authors show how the speed mechanism would enhance the overall firms' performances, but it is important to consider important dimensions. For instance, the authors point out that the competition between different geographical areas might negatively affect the speed of the communication (dysfunctional competition).

The last paper of this special issue, written by Zekhnini *et al.* (2025) and titled "Viable industrial supplier performance evaluation using fuzzy inference system: a case of the automotive industry," digs into the topic of industrial supplier selection. Inspired by the VUCA scenario and the automotive industry as empirical context, this paper assumes that selecting suppliers implies considering the viability of them as an important variable. The authors point out that viability concept is anchored within three important dimensions – the resilience, the sustainability and the digitalization of supply chains – which should be simultaneously combined to provide managers with updated tools to conduct the selection of new suppliers. The outcome of the study becomes a set of criteria able to support timely decision-making processes within industrial firms.

4. Lessons learned: the network perspective in the relationship between supply chain management and the reshaping of globalization

The impact of the restructuring of globalization processes on the structures and dynamics of the supply chain is the subject of increasing attention both in companies and in the literature. We are witnessing a complex reconfiguration of supply chains in which long-term processes are intertwined, related to the end of a globalization cycle that has characterized the past decades, due to the change in the geopolitical context that had accompanied globalization in the 1990s and 2000s. Our special issue aims to make a research contribution to the interpretation of these dynamics from the perspective of companies involved in the reworking of supply chains and participating in them with a view to internationalization. The seven papers published in this special issue offer a differentiated perspective in terms of topics (different industries), points of view (deglobalization, increasing entry into foreign markets) and research methodologies (single cases, multiple cases, different quantitative analysis methodologies). From this point of view, the research presented in this special issue is rich and yet such as to propose connections in the relevance assigned to some problems, such as the role of time and speed, the importance of alignment between different components of the supply chain, monitoring of the VUCA factors of the reference context.

This concluding section is dedicated to sharing some lessons learned on the key aspects that emerge in relation to the *effects of restructuring, or if we prefer, deglobalization on supply chains*. Furthermore, we would like to discuss the role that the network perspective offered by the IMP approach, to which some of the authors and the editors of this special issue refer, can have in understanding the processes of reconfiguration and adaptation of supply chains, which are at the center of all the papers in this special issue.

Examining the research context adopted by the articles in the special issue, the VUCA context, as conceived by Bennett and Lemoine (2014) and mentioned in our Introduction, is explicitly adopted by five of them. Two articles (Alessandro Cinti, Maria Rosaria Marcone, Andrea Sabatini and Valerio Temperini; Serena Rovai) use VUCA as a starting point to frame the problem of resilience and supply chain formation, while the other three (Mohaghegh *et al.*, 2025; Lin *et al.*, 2025; Zekhnini *et al.*, 2025) seek to further develop the VUCA conceptualization by analyzing, respectively, the capabilities of the supply chain, the speed of communication in the retail supply chain and the supplier selection process. The focus on delocalization as a research context is instead offered by the article by Antonio Picciotti, Enrico Baraldi, Francesco Ciabuschi, Luciano Fratocchi and Daniel Pedroletti (Baraldi *et al.*, 2025), which is the only one to delve into the problem of the movement and reallocation of manufacturing activities. E-commerce is set as the research context by Valeria Belvedere, Herbert Kotzab and Elisa Martina Martinelli (Belvedere *et al.*, 2025), together with a focus on the sustainability issues of international supply chains.

This last paper and two others (Zekhnini *et al.*, 2025; Mohaghegh *et al.*, 2025; Lin *et al.*, 2025) have also empirically anchored their discussion around the *macro trends* of sustainability and digitalization. In all these articles, digitalization and sustainability are considered important factors influencing the entire supply chain performance – where performance is interpreted as the collective effort of companies to achieve common sustainable goals; therefore, deglobalization would influence supply chain dynamics due to the transition toward sustainability and digitalization.

If we consider the remodeling of globalization and its effects on the structure of the supply chain together, we can observe at least two important results related respectively to the theme of the "reconfiguration" and that of the "transformation" of the structures of the supply chain. It is clear that reconfiguration involves important processes such as the *formation of the* supply chain, but we can also see that reconfiguration also involves the development of new ways of exchanging information to improve communication flows between the actors in the supply chain. It also appears that the reconfiguration of the supply chain at an international level is not a simple process (Altman *et al.*, 2024), but rather very challenging in terms of innovation and often the result of important adaptations between counterparts to accommodate transnational monetary investments and through open decision-making models (Guercini and Freeman, 2023).

Taking into account our articles and discussing the role and contribution of the IMP perspective in the study of structures, processes and supply chain management in the structural reorganization of globalization, it emerges that four (Baraldi *et al.*, 2025; Cinti *et al.*, 2025; Belvedere *et al.*, 2025; Rovai, 2025) of the seven articles published have explicitly adopted this perspective to understand the role of supplier relationships within specific business contexts and scenarios (reshoring, supply network resilience and entry into new markets). The centrality of the interaction process is emphasized as a mechanism for dealing with the complexities of supply chain reconfiguration and transformation, with particular emphasis on the long-term results that can be achieved. All four articles assume that, due to decoupling and deglobalization, organizations are required to modify their positions in the corporate network and, consequently, their roles both locally and internationally.

The other articles, while not using IMP to describe how organizations deal with the intersection of VUCA and international supply chain issues, offered interesting contributions to improve our understanding of communication processes along upstream and downstream supply chains, the roles of capabilities and their effects to better align supply chain actors, last-mile logistics issues and related opportunities for corporate customers. They highlight phenomena that could be analyzed and interpreted through the lens of IMP, suggesting areas of application for its interpretative models. In these areas, these models could contribute to a better understanding of the reconfiguration of supply networks and commercial relationships along international supply chains, helping to understand how companies react and adapt to the evolving global context, supporting the exploration of value creation and innovation processes in the geographical reconfiguration of commercial networks (Prenkert *et al.*, 2022).

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