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C O L U M B I A   U N I V E R S I T Y   I N   T H E   C I T Y   O F   N E W   Y O R K

## Trade Finance and the Great Trade Collapse

By JAE BIN AHN, MARY AMITI, AND DAVID E. WEINSTEIN\*

For nearly half a century (cf. Hendrik S. Houthakker and Stephen P. Magee 1969), economists have known that trade flows were two to three times more volatile than GDP despite the fact that standard theories predicted an elasticity of one. A major puzzle developed in the fourth quarter of 2008 as standard econometric models, which already incorporated these very high elasticities, could only predict 70 to 80 percent of the decline in world trade (see the estimates in Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) 2009).

Over the next two years, economists have tried, with little success, to improve on this “70 percent solution.” Much progress has been made in building theoretical models to explain why trade elasticities might differ from one, and calibration exercises soon began to match the econometric evidence. For example, Rudolfs Bems, Robert C. Johnson, and Kei-Mu Yi (2010) argue that once one takes into account input-output linkages, one can replicate the elasticity of imports with respect to GDP of three and explain 70 percent of the decline in world trade. Similarly, Jonathan Eaton et al. (2011) obtained an 80-percent solution using a more elaborate general equilibrium model. As a result of this, many economists have been arguing that one needs to consider trade finance-based explanations for why calibration exercises to date have underestimated the decline in world trade.

This paper reviews some of the evidence that financial factors may have resulted in a greater decline in exports than were predicted in models without financial frictions. We provide two new

pieces of evidence that support the trade finance channel. First, we show that export prices rose relative to domestic manufacturing prices across a large number of countries. Second, we find that import and export prices of goods shipped by sea, which are likely to be affected most by trade finance contractions, rose disproportionately more than those shipped by air or land.

### I. What is Trade Finance and Why Does it Matter For Exports?

At the most basic level, trade finance consists of borrowing using trade credit (accounts receivable) as collateral and/or the purchase of insurance against the possibility of trade credit defaults. In traditional trade finance contracts, exporters obtain working capital loans, credit lines, discounted prepayments, or credit default insurance based on foreign purchase orders or credit guarantees provided by the importer’s bank. Exporters tend to be much heavier users of trade finance than domestic firms because international transactions tend to take much longer to execute than domestic transactions and because of the perceived higher risk of international transactions. As Mary Amiti and David E. Weinstein (2009) have argued, the higher sensitivity of exports to financial forces provides a reason why exports should be more susceptible to financial shocks than domestic sales. JaeBin Ahn (2010) expanded on this intuition by developing the first general equilibrium framework for understanding why trade is particularly sensitive to financial shocks.

There are several reasons why these normally quiet markets may have provided an important conduit through which financial shocks affected trade flows in the recent crisis. First, Lehman’s default caused interbank lending markets to seize up. As one can see in Figure 1, the Lehman bankruptcy caused the London Interbank Offered Rate–Overnight Swap (LIBOR-OS) rate to rise sharply in most countries. This dramatic rise in interbank borrowing rates is strong evidence in favor of the idea that banks were facing difficulties raising short-term funds. The

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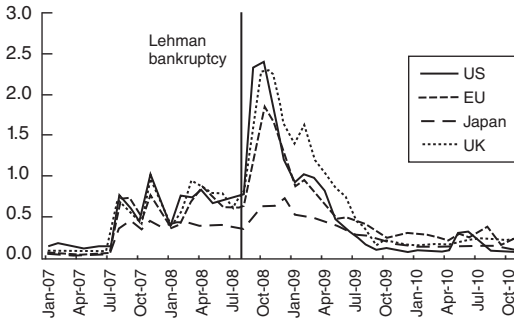


FIGURE 1. LIBOR-OIS SPREAD

Source: Bloomberg.com

higher borrowing costs were naturally passed through to trade finance contracts since these contracts are typically indexed to interbank rates. However, the impact of the financial crisis on the trade finance market was even larger. Six of Lehman's 30 largest unsecured creditors were institutions providing letters of credit (Amiti and Weinstein 2009). Moreover, the troubles of AIG and Citigroup meant that financial counterparties became much more concerned about AIG's credit default insurance and Citibank's credit guarantees. Amiti and Weinstein (2009) report the results of an International Monetary Fund-Bankers' Association for Trade and Finance (IMF-BAFT) survey of 88 banks in 44 countries that revealed that the average spreads on trade-related lending rose by 70 to 107 basis points during the crisis. These increases are remarkable given that typical spreads are around one fifth as large. By April 2009, the G20 countries pledged 250 billion dollars in trade finance in an effort to alleviate the difficulties faced by exporters.

Amiti and Weinstein (2009) show that a deterioration in the health of Japanese banks in the current crisis caused their client firms' exports to fall by more than their domestic sales even after controlling for industry-time fixed effects. Other papers that have used *external finance dependence* measures at the industry level as measures have, for the most part, also found that exports declined the most in industries with high external finance dependence. Jean-Charles Bricongne et al. (2010) and Davin Chor and Kalina Manova (2010) argue that sectors that were more financially dependent cut back on exports more. By contrast, Andrei Levchenko,

Logan Lewis, and Linda Tesar (2010b) failed to find a relationship between external finance dependence and US imports. However, Mona Haddad, Ann Harrison, and Catherine Hausman (2010) provide a simple explanation for this finding. The reason why import values did not fall more in financially dependent sectors in the United States is that import prices in sectors with high levels of external finance dependence rose by much more than the prices in other sectors. These higher import prices offset the declines in quantities and propped up import values, making it appear that there was no external finance effect on import values.

Although measures of external finance dependence are attractive to empirical researchers because they provide a way of linking aggregate data to financial conditions, there are serious issues with most of the aggregate measures of trade finance. The first is that *the conventional measure of external finance dependence is completely uncorrelated with levels of trade finance*. To see this, consider the definition of external finance dependence used in the literature: the share of capital expenditures that cannot be financed by cash flow. The definition of cash flow can be written as: (Cash Receipts – Cash Payments) – (Change in Inventories) – (Change in Receivables) + (Change in Payables). Firms with high trade finance needs are those with high levels of receivables and firms with low trade finance needs will have low levels of receivables, but if these needs remain unchanged, firms with high and low trade finance needs will have identical measures of external finance dependence. This does not mean that external finance dependence does not matter, but it does mean, as Robert C. Feenstra, Zhiyuan Li, and Miaojie Yu (2010) note, that the trade finance channel is a *different* channel than that of the conventional external finance channel.

A second issue in the literature surrounds the usage of trade credit intensity as a measure of trade finance intensity. For example, Levchenko, Lewis, and Tesar (2010b) assess trade finance dependence by looking at whether industries with high levels of accounts receivable relative to sales were hit harder. A problem with this measure is that trade finance has ambiguous effects on this ratio—more trade finance enables companies to finance their accounts receivable, but many trade finance products like letters of credit and export factoring enable exporters to

remove trade credits from their balance sheets in exchange for discounted prepayments.

Indeed, the impact of credit problems affecting these export factors is likely to be extremely hard to discern using only aggregate data on interbank rates and sectoral finance dependence. CIT, for instance, was a major export factor in 2008 with \$80 billion of assets that received \$2.3 billion in Troubled Asset Relief Program (TARP) funds. At the time of its bankruptcy in 2009, CIT had over a million customers in over 50 countries spread across 30 industries.<sup>1</sup> As this example illustrates, it is probably quite difficult to capture the effects of massive trade finance-related insolvencies without matched exporter–financial institution data.

## II. Do Price Movements Indicate an Export Supply Shock?

Despite the substantial data problems associated with identification, one can conjecture that if trade finance mattered in macro data, it would appear as a form of supply shock to exporters. The problem of discerning trade finance shocks from the data is that exporters were also buffeted by a series of demand shocks. However, some studies have provided evidence that supply shocks were particularly important for exporters. For example, Levchenko, Lewis, and Tesar (2010a) find that automobile imports—which fell quite rapidly in the crisis—actually experienced a rise in import prices. This seems to contradict the notion suggested by George Alessandria, Joe Kaboski, and Virgiliu Midrigan (2010) that the key driver of the decline in automobile sales was demand. Similarly, Haddad, Harrison, and Hausman (2010) decompose the declines in imports in the United States and European Union and find that import prices of manufactures actually *rose* in these countries: a fact that is more consistent with relatively large falls in imports arising from relatively large supply contractions.

We can also see these forces in operation by looking at aggregate price evidence. Overall, the prices of manufacturing goods fell sharply in the European Union, Japan, and the United States, so there is no question that the global economy

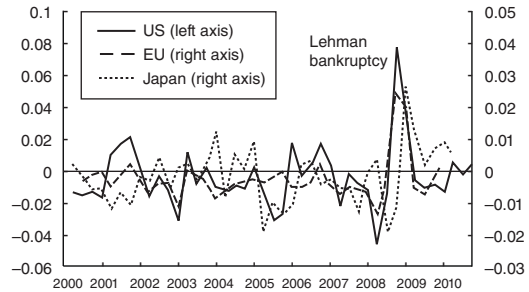


FIGURE 2. LOG CHANGE IN EXPORT PRICES LESS LOG CHANGE IN MANUFACTURING PRICES

*Notes:* US export data are the nonagricultural export prices, and the manufacturing data are the Producer Price Index for industrial commodities. EU export data are the EU-27 Producer Price Index for manufactured exports, and the manufacturing data are the domestic Producer Price Index for manufactured goods. Japanese export data are export prices, and the manufacturing data are the domestic corporate manufacturing goods price index.

*Sources:* Bureau of Labor Statistics, Eurostat, and Bank of Japan.

was hit by a massive demand shock. This is the basis of the 70 percent solution. However, there is also some evidence of supply shocks differentially affecting exporters. We can examine this more generally by looking at what happened to export prices relative to domestic producer prices. Our approach is to construct measures of the log change in export prices less the log change in producer prices for a series of OECD countries.

Figure 2 shows the plot for the United States, European Union and Japan. As one can see from the graph, US nonagricultural export prices staged their highest relative price increase in the first several quarters after the Lehman bankruptcy that they had experienced in the last ten years. And this happened in spite of the fact that the trade weighted dollar appreciated over this time period. Similarly, European exporters raised their prices relative to domestic manufacturers. Most surprisingly, Japan, which suffered a 20 percent decline in its export to GDP ratio in the first quarter of 2009—the largest quarterly decline in exports of any OECD country during the crisis—also saw its export prices rise sharply relative to its producer prices. The fact that exporters in the United States, European Union, and Japan—which jointly accounted for 51 percent of world exports in 2009—raised their relative export

<sup>1</sup> <http://ir.cit.com/phoenix.zhtml?c=99314&p=irol-newsArticle&ID=1170834&highlight=>

TABLE 1—EXPORT AND IMPORT PRICES OF SEA SHIPPING

Dependent variable	ln(export unit value) <sub>h,c,t</sub>	ln(export unit value) <sub>h,c,t</sub>	ln(import unit value) <sub>h,c,t</sub>	ln(import unit value) <sub>h,c,t</sub>
	Crisis = 1 if 9/08 to 6/09	Crisis = 1 if 9/08 to 9/09	Crisis = 1 if 9/08 to 6/09	Crisis = 1 if 9/08 to 9/09
Sea = 1 if value share shipped by sea > 90 percent	-0.512*** (0.002)	-0.513*** (0.002)	-0.890*** (0.003)	-0.892*** (0.003)
Sea × crisis	0.032*** (0.005)	0.030*** (0.004)	0.021*** (0.006)	0.022*** (0.006)
Fixed effects:				
HS10-time	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Country-time	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Observations	2,897,503	2,897,503	2,675,669	2,675,669
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	0.91	0.91	0.82	0.82

Notes: Bootstrapped standard errors in parenthesis with 200 repetitions. We define the export price as the ratio of the value of exports to the quantity shipped from the United States to country  $c$  at time  $t$ , and the import price as the ratio of the value of imports to the quantity shipped into the United States from country  $c$  at time  $t$ . We clean the data by dropping the top and bottom 12.5 percentiles based on the 12 month changes in log unit value. We drop any HS 10-digit code if the unit of measurement changed. In order to reduce the number of fixed effects and make the estimation easier, we dropped any country that made up less than 0.1 of a percent in total imports or exports. This leaves us with 57 countries that export to the United States and 71 countries that import from the United States.

\*\*\*Significant at the 1 percent level.

prices suggests that exports may have been facing a larger supply shock than domestic sales.

Amiti and Weinstein (2009) argue that the greater shipping times mean that trade financing needs are likely to be more important for goods shipped by sea than those shipped by air because exporters shipping by sea need more short-term working capital financing and face greater payment default risk while their goods are in transit. For the United States, goods shipped by land from Canada and Mexico also have quite short shipping times. Therefore, we examine whether goods shipped by sea, which were likely to be more susceptible to trade finance shocks, experienced greater price increases than goods shipped by air or land.

We use monthly US bilateral export and import data at the HS-10 level by mode of transport from the US Census Bureau for the period from January 2007 through July 2010 for all manufactured goods. One problem with these data is that the quantity information at the HS-10 level by country is not produced by mode of transport. Fortunately, at this level of aggregation most goods exported to or imported from a country are moved predominantly using a single mode of transport. We therefore categorized shipments as “seaborne” if more than 90

percent of the value of the goods exported to or imported from a country in a particular month were done by sea. Similarly, we classified goods as “not seaborne” if more than 90 percent of the shipments were not done by sea. We were able to classify 84 percent of imports and exports in this manner as either seaborne or not seaborne and construct unit values accordingly.

Our basic regression specification is presented below:

$$\ln p_{hct} = \alpha_{ht} + \alpha_{ct} + \beta_1 \times SEA_{hct} + \beta_2 \times SEA_{hct} \times CRISIS_t + \epsilon_{hct},$$

where  $p_{hct}$  is the unit value of HS code  $h$  exported to or imported from country  $c$  in month  $t$ ,  $SEA_{hct}$  is an indicator variable that equals one if the shipment was made by sea, and  $CRISIS_t$  is an indicator variable if the shipment occurred during the financial crisis, and all Greek variables are parameters to be estimated. Our specification includes a full set of HS-time and country-time dummies which should eliminate any good-specific or country specific demand shock such as macro or exchange rate shocks. Based on Figure 1, we use two definitions for the crisis period. First, we define it from the point of the Lehman

bankruptcy (i.e., September 2008) until the point it fell below 50 basis points (June 2009). Second we define it from the point of the Lehman bankruptcy until it returned to its long-run value of around 10 basis points (September 2009).

The results from this estimation exercise are presented in Table 1. The coefficient on the sea dummy is negative, indicating that goods shipped by sea tend to be substantially cheaper than goods shipped by air. What is most interesting from our perspective is that goods exported by sea tended to see their FOB prices rise by about 3 percent relative to goods shipped by air or land during the crisis period. Similarly, US seaborne imports saw their prices rise by 2 percent relative to goods delivered by land and sea during the crisis period. In other words, we see that the prices of goods that are likely to be the most sensitive to trade finance shocks were the ones that experienced the greatest relative price increases. While this evidence is not as direct as the firm-level evidence in Amiti and Weinstein (2009), it is suggestive of the idea that supply shocks in trade finance-intensive transactions contributed to the decline in world trade during the crisis.

### III. Conclusion

While there is no question that demand played a major part in the decline in world trade, there is increasing evidence that the liquidity contractions that rocked the financial world also played a part. Firm level evidence indicates that exporters whose financial institutions became unhealthy cut back on exports more than other firms, and imports declined more in sectors that had greater external financial dependence. This paper shows that some of these shocks may also have appeared in price movements. Export prices rose relative to domestic manufacturing prices during the crisis, and the prices of seaborne imports and exports—which are more sensitive to financial shocks—rose relative to goods sent by land or air. These are all indicative of important supply side shocks that may help us move beyond the 70 percent solution.

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