ASIA ECONOMICS ANALYST

How Much More Can China's Exports Grow?

China in the Long Run
Explore >



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- China's export rise is historically exceptional. From 2000 to 2025, China's share of global nominal goods exports increased from 4% to 15%, surpassing the peaks of Germany in the 1970s and Japan in the 1980s. With import volumes unlikely to rise significantly given the pursuit of "self-reliance", China's trade surplus continues to reach new highs, raising the question of how much further Chinese exports can expand.
- Unlike "China Shock 1.0" in 2001-07, when export growth coincided with overall industrial profit growth, the current export boom coincides with stagnating or falling profitability, a sign of supply-driven export strength. For example, the value of Chinese auto exports nearly doubled from 2021 to 2025, while profit margins fell from 6.4% to 4.8%. Future growth therefore depends increasingly on foreign markets' ability to absorb additional Chinese supply.
- The absorption capacity of China's trading partners appears to be shrinking somewhat. Emerging markets now take a larger share of Chinese exports, but many have developed large bilateral deficits with China. The number of countries running deficits above 3% of GDP with China rose from 24 in 2005 to 82 in 2025, and their combined share of Chinese exports increased from 24% to 44%. The majority of these countries—67 out of 82—are low-income EM economies.
- One offsetting factor is that China's trading partners may buy less from elsewhere when buying more from China. We estimate that over 2021-25, on average each 1pp-of-GDP increase in the deficit with China was associated with a 0.7pp decline in the deficit with all other countries, slightly more than the 0.6pp estimated for "China Shock 1.0" in 2001-07. This shift toward deficits with China and surpluses with non-China is most pronounced among ASEAN countries, likely reflecting regional supply chain reconfiguration over the past decade.
- We conduct a thought experiment where we assume China's share in other countries' non-mineral imports reaches the previous record high by any country during 2000-24. China supplied 17.6% of global ex-China non-mineral imports in

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2024. Under different assumptions, we estimate that this share could rise to 19.2-27.6%. With each 1pp gain in China's share adding about 5.5% to Chinese exports, this benchmarking exercise implies that robust real export growth can continue over the next few years. The runway is therefore clear for now—but eventually will depend on stronger economic growth in importing economies.



How Much More Can China's Exports Grow?

The rise in Chinese exports and the trade surplus over the past few decades has been extraordinary. From 2000 to 2025, China's share of global goods exports rose from less than 4% to nearly 15%—above Germany's peak of 13% in the late 1970s and Japan's peak of 10% in the 1980s, and surpassed only by the US before 1970 during the post-WWII period (left panel of Exhibit 1). Even as Chinese exports have continued to rise in recent years, imports have stalled amid weak domestic demand and the pursuit of self-reliance. From 2021 to 2025, China Customs' official data show that export volume increased by around 25%, whereas import volume was largely unchanged. This pattern is highly unusual: in the early 1960s, when US exports accounted for 19% of the global total, the US trade surplus was only 0.3% of global GDP, far below China's 1% in 2025 (right panel of Exhibit 1).

The natural question is: "How much more can China's exports grow?" This is especially relevant because Chinese imports are unlikely to rise much from here, given the strategic shift away from fossil fuels and toward technological self-sufficiency (crude oil, natural gas, and semiconductors accounted for 30% of Chinese imports in 2025). In this note, we examine the profitability of Chinese exports and trading partners' balance-of-payments constraints to assess the sustainability of China's export growth. Our analysis suggests that, at least over the next few years, there is still room for Chinese exports to maintain their strong momentum. Over the longer term, however, stronger economic growth in importing economies will be required for continued Chinese export gains.

Exhibit 1: China's export strength and trade surplus are exceptional by historical standards



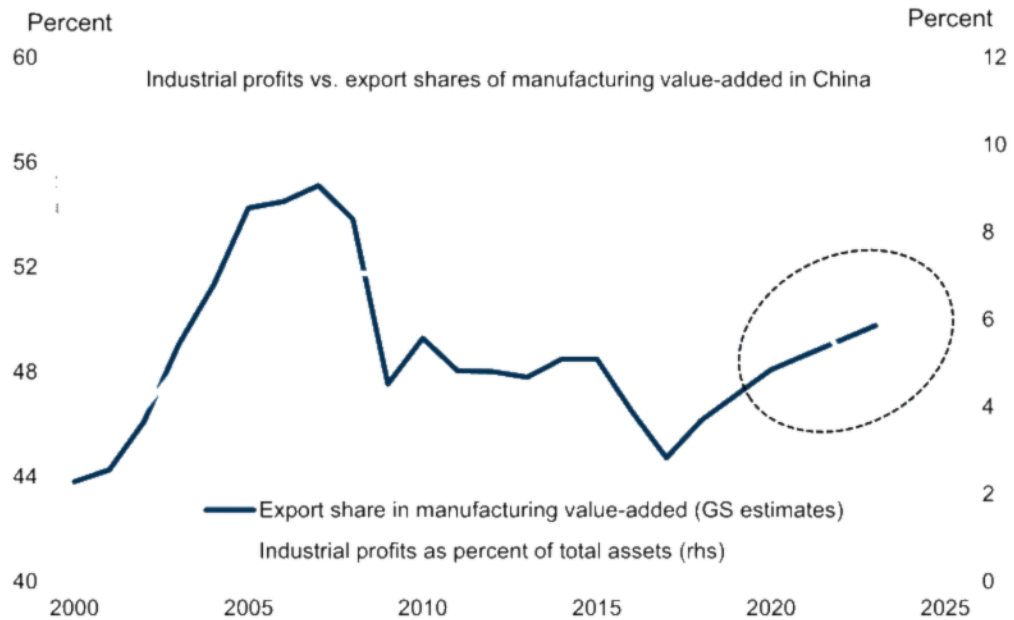
Source: Haver Analytics, Goldman Sachs Global Investment Research

Sustainability Through the Profitability Lens

One way to assess export sustainability is to ask whether rising exports coincide with rising profits. If so, the export boom is likely demand-driven and more persistent. During "China Shock 1.0" in 2001-07, this was indeed the case: Exhibit 2 shows that China's industrial profits as a share of total industrial assets rose alongside the export share of manufacturing value-added in the early 2000s. In recent years, however, this relationship has reversed: the export share of manufacturing value-added has climbed again, while industrial profits as a share of assets have declined. In other words, unlike

"China Shock 1.0," "China Shock 2.0" since 2021 appears to be supply-driven, featuring rising export volumes but falling overall profitability.

Exhibit 2: The export share of manufacturing value-added and industrial profits were positively correlated in the early 2000s but have become negatively correlated in recent years



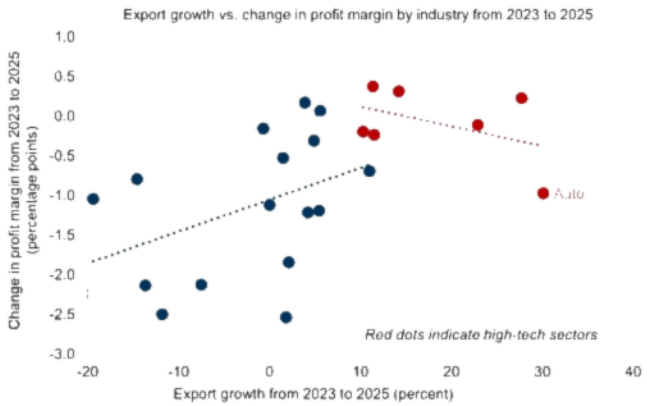
Shaded areas indicate the "China Shock 1.0" period of 2001-07 and the "China Shock 2.0" period since 2021. The latest input-output table published by the China National Bureau of Statistics (NBS) was from 2023 and we cannot estimate export share of manufacturing value-added for 2024 and 2025.

Source: NBS, Haver Analytics, Goldman Sachs Global Investment Research

While the lack of a detailed Chinese input-output table for recent years makes it difficult to assess the latest trends in the export share of manufacturing value-added, our study of export growth and changes in profit margins across industries from 2023 to 2025 suggests that profit margins have not improved along with rising exports in recent years, in contrast to the pattern during the early period of export-driven growth.[1] Exhibit 3 shows that high-tech sectors (red dots), which have received significant government support, experienced rapid export growth without noticeable increases in profit margins. In fact, the auto industry's profit margin fell from 6.4% in 2021 to 4.8% in 2025 despite an almost 100% increase in export value over the period, illustrating China's enormous production capacity. The sustainability of Chinese export growth therefore depends on trading partners' ability to absorb more Chinese products. We turn to China's trading partners next.

[1] Because the NBS sector classification for industrial profits is different from the HS code classification for export growth, we map the two and only show sectors where we can bridge the two classifications.

Exhibit 3: High-tech sectors have seen strong export growth recently, but not rising profit margins



Source: CEIC, Goldman Sachs Global Investment Research

Pressures Are Increasing…

On the surface, China Shock 1.0 and China Shock 2.0 look similar in terms of shifting export destinations. In both 2001-07 and 2021-25, emerging markets—including low-income and other EM countries—accounted for rising shares of Chinese exports.[2] By contrast, developed markets—including the US and other DM countries—accounted for falling shares (Exhibit 4). Our previous research has documented the growing importance of EM countries to Chinese exports (see here and here, for example).

Exhibit 4: In both 2001-07 and 2021-25, the EM share of Chinese exports increased



Source: Haver Analytics, Goldman Sachs Global Investment Research

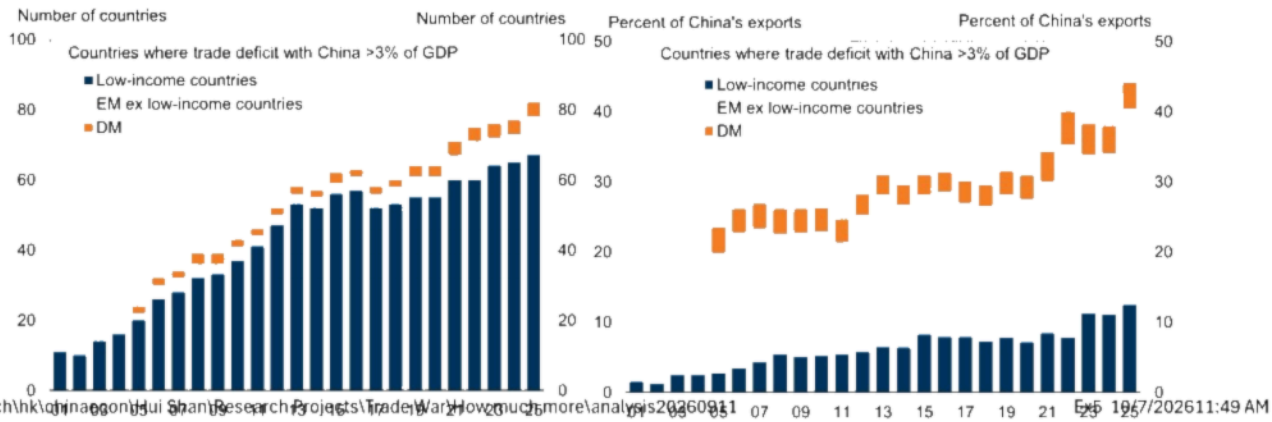
Beneath the surface, however, bilateral trade balances between EM countries—especially low-income countries—and China have deteriorated notably over the past two decades. For example, in 2005, only 24 countries had trade deficits with China exceeding 3% of their GDP, and these countries received 24% of total Chinese exports. In 2025, however, the number of countries with bilateral trade deficits above 3% of GDP rose to 82, and collectively they accounted for 44% of total Chinese exports (Exhibit 5). Among the 82 countries, 67 are low-income countries. These tend to be small

[2] "Other EM" include 27 countries with relatively large financial markets or large population/high GDP levels. "Low-income countries" include 128 economies with per-capita incomes of less than US$ 4000 per annum.

economies, many of which are in Africa, the Caribbean and Oceania. The 67 countries combined accounted for 12% of Chinese exports in 2025, compared with 28% for the 11 other EM economies whose trade deficits with China exceeded 3% of GDP (the biggest four of which are Vietnam, Malaysia, Thailand, and Mexico).

Because trading partners' trade deficits cannot rise indefinitely, the sharp increase in the number of countries already facing large and still-rising deficits with China points to balance-of-payments constraints for some of China's trading partners.

Exhibit 5: An increasing number of China's trading partners face bilateral trade deficits exceeding 3% of GDP



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Source: Haver Analytics, Goldman Sachs Global Investment Research

… But There Is Still Room to Import More from China Over the Next Few Years

One offsetting factor is trading partners' substitution away from imports from other countries and toward imports from China, limiting the impact on their overall trade deficits even as their bilateral deficits with China rise. To gauge the extent of this substitution, we estimate a panel regression model using annual data for more than 170 countries. Exhibit 6 presents the results separately for 2001-07 and 2021-25, from which we draw two conclusions.

First, there is meaningful substitution between imports from China and those from elsewhere. Second, this effect has strengthened slightly in recent years. We estimate that each 1pp-of-GDP increase in the deficit with China was associated with a 0.7pp decline in the deficit with non-China in 2021-25, compared with 0.6pp in 2001-07. This pattern suggests that the overall pressure on trading partners from higher imports from China may be smaller than bilateral trade deficits alone imply. That said, our estimates still point to weaker balance-of-payments positions, as the offset is less than one-for-one.

Exhibit 6: China's trading partners shifted away from imports from non-China sources when they increase imports from China



Source: Goldman Sachs Global Investment Research

In many EM economies, balance-of-payment pressures manifest themselves through FX depreciation. In Exhibit 7, we assess the sustainability of bilateral trade deficits with China from a financing perspective, focusing on trade deficits as a share of FX reserves rather than as a percentage of GDP. We separate the analysis into ASEAN and EM ex ASEAN because of the distinct patterns in the two groups.

ASEAN countries' trade deficits as a share of FX reserves have diverged sharply. While deficits with China have increased significantly in recent years, trade balances with non-China have improved meaningfully. This clear offsetting pattern likely reflects the reconfiguration of regional supply chains over the past decade.

For the remaining EM countries, trade deficits with China have edged up in recent years, while deficits with non-China have increased notably, suggesting weaker overall balance-of-payments conditions and scope to shift imports from non-China to China. Within this broader EM ex ASEAN group, there remains significant heterogeneity: for some low-income countries, both deficits with China and deficits with non-China approach 50% of FX reserves, underscoring significant balance-of-payments vulnerability, although their combined shares of global GDP and Chinese exports remain small.

Exhibit 7: ASEAN countries' widening deficits with China are fully offset by rising surpluses with non-China, while EM ex ASEAN countries show wider deficits with both China and non-China



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Source: Haver Analytics, Goldman Sachs Global Investment Research

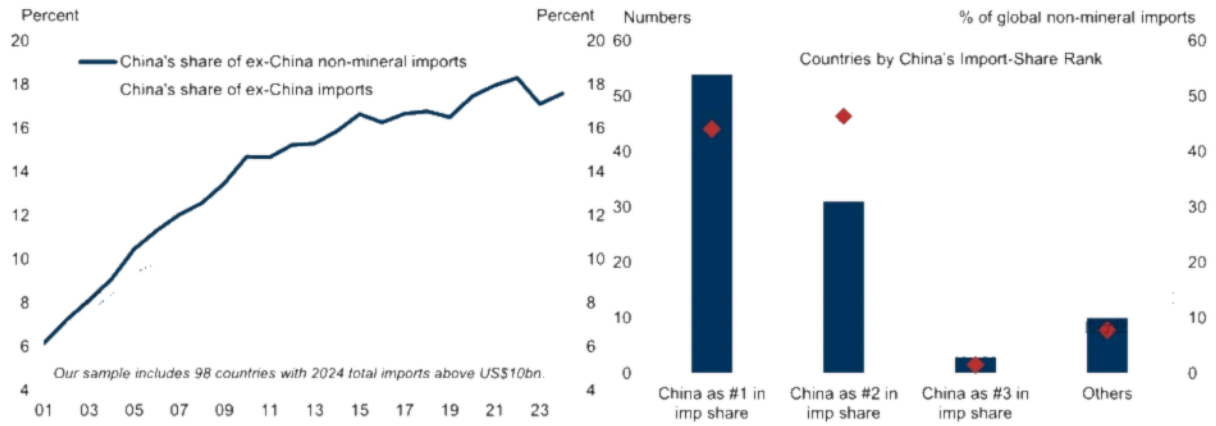
Benchmarking the Upside for Chinese Exports

To quantify how much further Chinese exports can grow, we perform a simple thought experiment. We examine 98 ex-China countries whose total imports were at least US$10bn in 2024, the latest year for which HS-2-level trade data are available for all sample countries at the time of writing. We exclude mineral imports, mostly crude oil, because China does not export oil and only non-mineral trade is relevant to gauging the potential increase in China's market share.[3] The left panel of Exhibit 8 shows that China accounted for 15.2% of total imports and 17.6% of total non-mineral imports by the 98 countries in 2024.

Together, our sample of 98 countries represents roughly 90% of global ex-China trade. In 2024, China was the largest source of imports for 54 of them. These countries, however, tend to be smaller and accounted for 44% of global ex-China non-mineral imports (right panel of Exhibit 8). China was the second-largest supplier for another 31 countries, which accounted for 46% of global ex-China non-mineral imports. The remaining 13 countries accounted for the final 10%.

[3] Although China does export refined petroleum products, its potential to grow significantly in the coming years is capped by the leadership's pledge to reach peak carbon emissions by 2030. Our analysis excludes both crude oil and refined petroleum products imports.

Exhibit 8: China accounted for 17.6% of global ex-China non-mineral imports in 2024 and was the largest source of imports for more than half of the countries in our sample



Source: Comtrade, Trademap, Haver Analytics, Goldman Sachs Global Investment Research

In a benchmarking exercise, we set China's share of each country's non-mineral imports equal to the highest bilateral share that country recorded with any trading partner during 2000-24. For example, Germany accounted for 16.3% of the UK's non-mineral imports in 2014, the highest share for any single country during the 2000-24 period. We therefore replace China's actual 2024 share of 13.4% of UK non-mineral imports with 16.3%. This approach may overstate China's upside in some markets: Mexico's highest import share was 67%, supplied by the US in 2000. China is unlikely to reach 67% of Mexico's non-mineral imports because of Mexico's geographic proximity to the US and the two countries' free-trade agreement. Conversely, our methodology may understate China's upside in some markets because it does not allow out-of-sample extrapolation. China accounted for 24% of Saudi Arabia's imports in 2024, and we leave that share unchanged because it was Saudi Arabia's highest bilateral share during 2000-24. In practice, however, China's share is likely to rise further if the recent trend continues.

Exhibit 9 shows that, in this thought experiment, China's share of global non-mineral imports could rise from 17.6% to 27.6%, an increase equivalent to 9.5pp of China's GDP and 1.9pp of global GDP. If we hold China's shares of US, Canadian, and Mexican non-mineral imports unchanged from their 2024 levels, the estimate falls to 23%. Under more conservative assumptions—holding China's shares unchanged for the US, Canada, Mexico, and all other DM countries—the estimate falls further to around 19.2%, still noticeably above the actual 17.6% recorded in 2024.

Exhibit 9: Various scenarios suggest potentially significant upside in China's share of global non-mineral imports

China share of global non-mineral exports under different scenarios	China share of global exports (%)	China exports to China GDP ratio (%)	China exports to global GDP ratio (%)
2024 Actual	**17.6**	**16.5**	**3.5**
Scenario 1 China takes the highest single-country market share that importing country had ever seen in 2000-2024	27.6	26.0	5.4
Scenario 2 Scenario 1 + Keep US/Canda/Mexico's import share from China unchanged	23.0	21.6	4.5
Scenario 3 Scenario 2 + Keep DM's import share from China unchanged	19.2	18.1	3.8

Source: Goldman Sachs Global Investment Research

For every 1pp increase in China's share of global non-mineral imports, Chinese exports would grow by 5.5%. Combined with annual trend growth of 2.5% in global trade, this implies 8% annual growth in Chinese real exports in the near term, even under the most conservative scenario shown in Exhibit 9. Under similar assumptions but using the less conservative Scenario 2, China could see 8% annual real export growth through 2031.

Taken together, our analysis suggests that Chinese export growth still has some runway over the next few years, despite the historically high trade surplus. However, pockets of vulnerability remain, particularly among low-income countries whose trade deficits exceed 50% of FX reserves. Chinese exporters may temporarily ease these balance-of-payments constraints through vendor financing, but extending the runway sustainably will require stronger economic growth in importing countries.

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