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Optimizing Logistics Management in International Trade: Post-Pandemic Strategies

By

¹Bekti Utomo and ²Tri Wisudawati

¹Sebelas Maret University

²Jenderal Soedirman University



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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed critical vulnerabilities in global logistics and supply chain systems, disrupting international trade flows and compelling organizations to reconsider long-standing operational frameworks. This article examines post-pandemic strategies for optimizing logistics management in international trade, with particular focus on supply chain resilience, digitalization, and sustainable logistics practices. Through a systematic literature review and qualitative analysis of industry reports and empirical studies published between 2020 and 2024, this research identifies key strategic shifts, including nearshoring, digital twin adoption, AI-driven demand forecasting, and green logistics integration. Findings suggest that organizations that proactively embraced technological innovation and diversified their supply networks demonstrated significantly greater adaptability. The article concludes with practical recommendations for logistics managers navigating the post-pandemic global trade environment.

Keywords: *logistics management, international trade, post-pandemic supply chain, digitalization, supply chain resilience, sustainable logistics*

1.0 Introduction

The global pandemic that began in early 2020 triggered an unprecedented disruption to international trade and logistics systems worldwide. Port congestions, factory shutdowns, border closures, and a dramatic surge in e-commerce demand collectively exposed the fragility of just-in-time (JIT) logistics models that had dominated global supply chains for decades (Ivanov & Dolgui, 2021). As trade volumes contracted sharply in the first half of 2020 before rebounding unevenly across different sectors and regions, logistics managers faced the dual challenge of maintaining operational continuity while simultaneously rethinking foundational strategic assumptions.

International trade logistics encompasses the planning, implementation, and control of the efficient flow and storage of goods, services, and information from the point of origin to the point of consumption across national borders (Christopher, 2016). Before the pandemic, many multinational corporations had optimized their logistics networks primarily for cost efficiency, relying heavily on lean inventories, single-source suppliers—often concentrated in Asia—and tightly coupled transportation networks with minimal redundancy. When these systems faltered under pandemic pressure, the strategic inadequacy of pure cost-minimization became apparent.

The post-pandemic era has thus inaugurated a period of strategic recalibration. Governments, international organizations such as the World Trade Organization (WTO), and private sector leaders have collectively called for greater supply chain resilience, transparency, and sustainability (WTO, 2021). The adoption of advanced technologies—including artificial intelligence (AI), blockchain, Internet of Things (IoT), and cloud-based logistics platforms—has accelerated considerably as firms seek greater visibility and agility across their supply networks.

This article aims to contribute to the growing body of knowledge on post-pandemic logistics optimization by systematically examining the strategies that have emerged across the international trade landscape. Specifically, the research addresses the following questions: What structural changes have emerged in global logistics management since the pandemic? How have digitalization and technology adoption shaped resilience strategies? What role does sustainability play in the evolving logistics paradigm? And what practical frameworks can guide logistics managers in optimizing operations for the current global environment?

The article is organized as follows. Section 2 presents a review of relevant literature on logistics management, supply chain resilience, and the impact of the pandemic on



international trade. Section 3 outlines the methodology employed. Section 4 discusses key findings across thematic areas, and concluding remarks with practical recommendations are offered at the end.

2.0 Literature Review

2.1 Logistics Management in International Trade: A Pre-Pandemic Overview

Prior to the pandemic, logistics management in international trade was predominantly shaped by the principles of lean supply chain management and globalization-driven efficiency. The work of Christopher (2016) remains foundational, defining logistics as the process of strategically managing the procurement, movement, and storage of materials, parts, and finished inventory. In the international context, scholars such as Mentzer et al. (2001) emphasized the importance of supply chain integration, arguing that coordinated relationships across organizational boundaries were essential for competitive advantage.

The globalization of production, enabled by trade liberalization and advances in transportation infrastructure, led many firms to adopt globally dispersed supply networks (Hummels & Schaur, 2013). Container shipping became the backbone of international trade, with an estimated 80 percent of global trade by volume carried by sea (UNCTAD, 2020). This era was characterized by cost optimization, with firms leveraging low-cost manufacturing in emerging economies and maintaining minimal safety stock to reduce holding costs.

However, scholars had already identified vulnerabilities in these models prior to 2020. Sheffi and Rice (2005) warned that highly efficient supply chains often lacked the redundancy necessary to absorb disruptions, while Tang (2006) argued for robust supply chain strategies that could balance efficiency with resilience. The pandemic would ultimately validate these concerns at a global scale.

2.2 The Pandemic's Impact on Global Logistics and Trade

The COVID-19 pandemic constituted a compound systemic shock to global supply chains, operating through multiple simultaneous channels: demand shocks, supply shocks, and logistics network disruptions (Ivanov, 2020). The World Bank (2020) reported that global trade fell by approximately 5.3 percent in 2020, with sector-specific contractions far exceeding this aggregate figure in industries such as automotive and aerospace.

Port congestion emerged as a particularly acute challenge. The closure of key manufacturing hubs in China during early 2020, followed by uneven demand recovery patterns, created severe imbalances in global container flows. Ports in Los Angeles, Rotterdam, and Shanghai experienced record delays, while shipping costs—as measured by the Freightos Baltic Index—increased by over 500 percent between mid-2020 and late 2021 (Freightos, 2022).

Research by Guan et al. (2020) demonstrated that supply chain disruptions from COVID-19 propagated across global production networks, with the most severely affected sectors

being those with high levels of international input-output linkages. Similarly, Craighead et al. (2020) identified the pandemic as a 'black elephant' event—one that was both predictable in its broad outlines and catastrophic in its realization—calling for a fundamental rethink of supply chain risk management frameworks.

The pandemic also dramatically accelerated the growth of e-commerce, placing unprecedented pressure on last-mile delivery networks and warehouse capacity (Delfmann et al., 2021). This demand surge, occurring simultaneously with pandemic-related labor shortages at logistics facilities, further strained international logistics systems that had been designed for B2B rather than direct-to-consumer fulfillment.

2.3 Supply Chain Resilience: Concepts and Frameworks

Supply chain resilience has emerged as the central conceptual framework for post-pandemic logistics strategy. Ponomarov and Holcomb (2009, p. 131) define supply chain resilience as 'the adaptive capability of the supply chain to prepare for unexpected events, respond to disruptions, and recover from them by maintaining continuity of operations at the desired level of connectedness and control over structure and function.' This definition emphasizes three interrelated capabilities: readiness, response, and recovery.

Hohenstein et al. (2015) proposed a four-stage resilience framework—readiness, response, recovery, and growth—arguing that truly resilient supply chains do not merely return to their pre-disruption state but emerge from disruptions with enhanced capabilities. Post-pandemic scholarship has largely endorsed and extended this framework, emphasizing the importance of 'bouncing forward' rather than merely 'bouncing back' (Ambulkar et al., 2015).

Key resilience-building strategies identified in the literature include supply base diversification, strategic inventory buffering, nearshoring and reshoring, and the development of alternative transportation modes (Shih, 2020; Simchi-Levi et al., 2020). Notably, many of these strategies involve deliberate trade-offs against pure cost efficiency, representing a philosophical shift in how logistics performance is conceptualized and measured.

2.4 Digitalization and Technology in Post-Pandemic Logistics

The accelerating adoption of digital technologies represents perhaps the most significant structural transformation in post-pandemic logistics. Scholars and practitioners have identified several key technological domains: artificial intelligence and machine learning for demand forecasting and route optimization; blockchain for supply chain transparency and provenance tracking; IoT sensors for real-time cargo visibility; and digital twin technology for supply chain simulation and scenario planning (Ivanov & Dolgui, 2021; Queiroz et al., 2021).

AI-driven demand forecasting has attracted particular scholarly attention. Traditional forecasting models, largely based on historical demand patterns, proved wholly

inadequate during the pandemic, when demand profiles shifted dramatically within weeks (Choi, 2021). Machine learning models capable of incorporating external signals—including mobility data, social media sentiment, and macroeconomic indicators—demonstrated significantly superior predictive accuracy during high-volatility periods.

Blockchain technology has been positioned as a solution to the persistent challenge of supply chain visibility and trust. In international trade specifically, the involvement of multiple parties—exporters, freight forwarders, shipping lines, customs authorities, and importers—creates significant information asymmetries and coordination challenges. Pilot implementations by Maersk and IBM's TradeLens platform, though ultimately discontinued in 2022, demonstrated both the potential and the institutional complexity of blockchain adoption in global trade (Queiroz et al., 2021).

The concept of the digital supply chain twin—a dynamic, real-time simulation model of physical supply chain operations—has emerged as a particularly promising tool for resilience planning. By enabling logistics managers to simulate the impact of potential disruptions and test mitigation strategies before they are needed, digital twins represent a qualitative advance in supply chain risk management capabilities (Ivanov & Dolgui, 2021).

2.5 Sustainable Logistics and the Green Imperative

Sustainability considerations have become increasingly integrated into logistics strategy in the post-pandemic period, driven by a combination of regulatory pressure, investor expectations, and evolving customer preferences. The European Union's Green Deal, the United States' commitments under the Paris Agreement, and analogous policy frameworks in major trading nations have established clear regulatory trajectories that international logistics operators must navigate (European Commission, 2020).

In the logistics sector, environmental sustainability is primarily measured through carbon emissions, energy consumption, and waste generation. Maritime shipping, which accounts for approximately 2.5 percent of global greenhouse gas emissions, faces particular regulatory scrutiny through the International Maritime Organization's (IMO) strategy targeting a 50 percent reduction in total emissions by 2050 (IMO, 2021). Road freight, air cargo, and port operations similarly face tightening emissions standards across major markets.

Sustainable logistics practices encompass a range of interventions, including modal shift to lower-carbon transportation, fleet electrification, route optimization to minimize empty running, eco-friendly packaging, and circular economy principles applied to returns management (Sustainable Supply Chain Foundation, 2021). Scholars have noted that sustainability and resilience objectives frequently align rather than conflict: diversified, localized supply networks not only reduce vulnerability to global disruptions but also reduce the carbon footprint associated with long-distance transportation.

3.0 Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study employs a qualitative research design combining a systematic literature review with thematic analysis of industry reports, policy documents, and empirical case studies. A qualitative approach was deemed appropriate given the research objective of identifying and analyzing emerging strategic patterns in post-pandemic logistics management—a domain characterized by significant novelty, complexity, and contextual variation that does not lend itself readily to quantitative generalization at this stage of scholarly development.

The research follows the epistemological tradition of interpretivism, recognizing that the strategic choices of logistics managers are shaped by interpretive frameworks, institutional contexts, and organizational cultures that require qualitative analysis to understand adequately (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). This is consistent with a growing body of logistics and supply chain management research that employs qualitative and mixed-methods approaches to capture the nuanced realities of managerial decision-making in complex, dynamic environments.

3.2 Literature Search and Selection

A systematic search of peer-reviewed literature was conducted across the following academic databases: Scopus, Web of Science, Business Source Complete (EBSCOhost), and Google Scholar. The search was conducted in October 2024 using a combination of controlled vocabulary and free-text search terms, including: 'post-pandemic logistics,' 'supply chain resilience,' 'international trade disruption,' 'logistics digitalization,' 'sustainable supply chain,' and 'COVID-19 supply chain.'

Inclusion criteria required that sources: (1) were published between January 2020 and October 2024; (2) addressed logistics management or supply chain management in an international trade context; (3) were peer-reviewed journal articles, book chapters, or high-quality grey literature (including reports from established international organizations such as the WTO, World Bank, UNCTAD, and IMO); and (4) were available in English. Sources were excluded if they focused exclusively on domestic logistics operations, predated the pandemic period, or were not available in full text.

The initial search yielded 847 potentially relevant sources. Following abstract screening and full-text review, 78 sources were retained for inclusion in the literature review. An additional 22 industry reports and policy documents from recognized international organizations were incorporated to provide practitioner and policy perspectives alongside academic scholarship.

4.0 Discussion of Findings

4.1 Structural Reorganization of Global Supply Networks

Perhaps the most consequential strategic shift in post-pandemic international logistics has been the structural reorganization of global supply networks away from hyper-

concentrated, cost-optimized configurations toward more distributed, resilient architectures. The pandemic made viscerally apparent the systemic risks associated with high geographic concentration of production, particularly in a single country, and the vulnerabilities of extended global supply chains with multiple sequential dependencies.

The twin strategies of nearshoring and reshoring have gained considerable momentum across multiple industries. Nearshoring—the relocation of production or sourcing to geographically proximate countries—reduces transportation lead times, currency exposure, and logistical complexity while retaining the cost advantages of lower-wage production environments relative to domestic alternatives. Reshoring—the return of production to the home country—offers maximum supply chain control but typically entails significant cost penalties. Survey evidence from the consulting firm McKinsey & Company (2021) found that 93 percent of supply chain executives planned to increase their supply chain resilience, with nearshoring and supplier diversification the most commonly cited strategies.

In practice, the nearshoring trend has been most pronounced in North American manufacturing, where Mexico has emerged as a major beneficiary of supply chain reconfigurations away from China. In Europe, Eastern European countries including Poland, Romania, and the Czech Republic have similarly attracted increased manufacturing investment from Western European firms seeking to reduce their Asia-Pacific exposure (Simchi-Levi et al., 2020). These geographic shifts have significant implications for international logistics flows, port infrastructure priorities, and bilateral trade relationships.

Supplier diversification—the practice of qualifying multiple suppliers for the same input, ideally spanning different geographic regions—has been equally prominent in post-pandemic strategies. The pre-pandemic logic of single-sourcing for cost and coordination efficiency gave way to the recognition that supplier concentration constitutes a critical vulnerability. However, managing a more diverse supplier base entails its own coordination costs and quality management challenges, and practitioners have noted the difficulty of replicating the deeply embedded relationships and tacit knowledge that characterized long-standing supplier partnerships (Craighead et al., 2020).

Strategic inventory management has also undergone fundamental reassessment. The lean, JIT philosophy that minimized inventory holding costs proved catastrophic when supply disruptions collided with demand surges, as exemplified by the global semiconductor shortage that began in 2021 and rippled across automotive, consumer electronics, and industrial machinery sectors for over two years (Aloini et al., 2023). Post-pandemic inventory strategy increasingly embraces the concept of strategic buffers—deliberate safety stocks for critical components—calibrated against supply risk profiles rather than pure cost optimization criteria.

4.2 Digital Transformation and Technology Adoption

The pandemic served as a powerful accelerant of digital transformation in logistics, compressing technology adoption timelines that might otherwise have unfolded over a decade into a period of one to two years. This acceleration was driven by the operational imperative of maintaining supply chain visibility and coordination when traditional face-to-face interactions, site visits, and paper-based processes became impossible or severely constrained.

AI-powered demand forecasting and inventory optimization have emerged as among the most practically impactful technological applications. The violent demand shifts of the pandemic—characterized by simultaneous spikes in personal protective equipment and consumer electronics demand alongside collapses in travel-related logistics—overwhelmed traditional statistical forecasting models. Machine learning approaches, capable of incorporating a broader range of external signals and updating rapidly as conditions changed, demonstrated meaningfully superior performance in high-volatility environments (Choi, 2021). Large-scale logistics operators including Amazon, DHL, and Maersk have publicly committed to AI-driven demand sensing as a core operational capability.

Real-time cargo visibility, enabled by IoT sensors and satellite tracking, has become increasingly standard for international shipments. The ability to monitor container location, temperature, humidity, and handling conditions throughout the global supply chain reduces uncertainty, enables proactive exception management, and supports more accurate delivery commitment to downstream customers. Platforms such as project44 and FourKites have emerged as significant players in the global visibility market, aggregating data from multiple carriers and logistics service providers into unified dashboards accessible to shippers and their customers (Delfmann et al., 2021).

Blockchain applications in international trade documentation have progressed from pilot projects to nascent commercial adoption, albeit more slowly than some proponents anticipated. The complexity of the international trade documentation ecosystem—encompassing bills of lading, letters of credit, certificates of origin, customs declarations, and phytosanitary certificates—creates significant inefficiencies that blockchain-based platforms aim to address. The WAVE BL and essDOCS platforms have achieved commercial traction in specific trade corridors, though broad industry adoption remains constrained by network effects, regulatory uncertainty, and institutional inertia (Queiroz et al., 2021).

Digital twin technology represents an emerging frontier in logistics planning and risk management. By creating a high-fidelity virtual model of the physical supply chain—integrating data from IoT sensors, enterprise resource planning systems, carrier tracking platforms, and external data sources—digital twins enable logistics managers to simulate the impact of potential disruptions, test alternative routing strategies, and optimize network configurations without the

risks and costs of physical experimentation. Ivanov and Dolgui (2021) identified digital supply chain twins as among the most promising emerging tools for supply chain resilience, noting their particular value in enabling anticipatory rather than merely reactive disruption management.

The broader digital transformation of logistics operations has also encompassed warehouse automation, including autonomous mobile robots and goods-to-person picking systems; autonomous trucking pilots; drone delivery experimentation; and the integration of logistics data into broader supply chain control tower architectures. While these technologies remain in varying stages of commercial maturity, their collective trajectory suggests a logistics sector undergoing fundamental operational transformation that will reshape labor requirements, infrastructure investment patterns, and competitive dynamics across the industry.

4.3 Evolution of Supply Chain Risk Management

The pandemic revealed profound deficiencies in prevailing supply chain risk management frameworks, most of which had been calibrated against operational disruptions of limited duration and geographic scope rather than the kind of systemic, globally synchronous shock that COVID-19 represented. The post-pandemic period has seen significant scholarly and practitioner attention directed toward developing more robust risk management frameworks commensurate with the actual threat landscape facing international logistics operations.

A critical conceptual evolution has been the distinction between supply chain risk management—oriented toward probabilistic risk identification and mitigation—and supply chain resilience—oriented toward the adaptive capacity to respond and recover from disruptions regardless of their specific nature (Hohenstein et al., 2015). This distinction has practical implications: risk management approaches focused on identifying and mitigating specific, known threats proved inadequate against a novel pandemic, whereas organizations with broadly resilient capabilities—including operational flexibility, robust information systems, and strong supplier relationships—adapted more effectively to the unforeseen disruption.

Scenario planning and stress testing have gained prominence as risk management tools in the post-pandemic environment. Drawing on practices more established in the financial services sector, forward-thinking logistics organizations have begun developing structured scenario analyses exploring the supply chain implications of major disruption events—including further pandemics, climate-related extreme weather events, geopolitical conflicts, and critical infrastructure failures. These scenarios inform investment priorities and contingency planning in ways that traditional risk registers, focused on known and quantifiable risks, cannot.

Geopolitical risk has emerged as a particularly significant and complex dimension of international logistics risk management. The Russia-Ukraine conflict, which erupted in February 2022, created immediate disruptions to energy markets, grain trade flows, and logistics corridors through

Eastern Europe and the Black Sea region, affecting supply chains far removed from the conflict zone (Aloini et al., 2023). More broadly, escalating U.S.-China trade tensions and the increasing politicization of technology supply chains have introduced strategic and regulatory uncertainties into logistics planning that were largely absent from pre-pandemic risk frameworks.

Collaborative risk management—including information sharing between supply chain partners, joint contingency planning, and coordinated disruption response—has been identified as a critical enabler of resilience that cannot be developed by any single organization in isolation. The pandemic demonstrated that the resilience of any individual actor in a supply chain is ultimately constrained by the resilience of its partners and the broader logistics ecosystem in which it operates. This recognition has stimulated interest in supply chain collaboration platforms, multi-stakeholder resilience initiatives, and revised contractual frameworks that create shared incentives for resilience investment (Ambulkar et al., 2015).

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