

14th WTO Ministerial Conference



14th WTO Ministerial Conference
Yaoundé - Cameroon
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MC14 Issue guide

Policy Brief

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Introduction

Every two years trade ministers from all over the world gather to discuss, expand, add-to and renegotiate the treaties that collectively make up the World Trade Organization. The 14th such Ministerial Conference, known colloquially as “MC14”, will take place March 26-29 in Yaoundé, Cameroon.

Ministers will be confronted with a system in a crisis of a fundamentally different nature to those it has experienced in the past. Almost since the creation of the organization in 1995, the WTO has faced an ongoing crisis in its negotiations pillar, as members failed year after year to live up to the phased liberalization objectives envisaged by the mandate.

A dispute-resolution crisis compounded the negotiation crisis as a still-ongoing US block on new appointments to the WTO’s Appellate Body saw it lose quorum in 2019. The dispute resolution system has limped on through panel rulings, negotiations and the opt-in Multi-Party Interim Appeal Arbitration Agreement (MPIA), but the loss of binding appeals remains a serious blow.

These crises limited the ability of the organization to create new rules and to interpret disagreements about the meaning of existing commitments, but they did not represent a rejection of the rules themselves. That’s what makes this new crisis different.



The US and EU, major global economies previously seen as the architects of the system have come out with statements formally questioning the ongoing utility of Most Favoured Nation (MFN), a foundational principle found in Paragraph 1 of Article 1 of the 1947 GATT from which the WTO evolved. This challenges not just the creation of new rules, and the interpretation of edge cases, but the very rules themselves.

This is the backdrop against which Ministers and delegations will be meeting in Yaoundé.

Expectations for the Ministerial Conference are understandably muted. There are no expectations of a significant liberalization breakthrough or movement on long-standing negotiations like agricultural subsidies. Instead, Yaoundé offers Ministers a chance to convene, to discuss the state of trade and the multilateral system, and

The three main areas where it is believed Ministers may take decisions at MC14 are:

WTO Reform

WTO Reform, providing guidance for officials to take forward in Geneva;

E-commerce Moratorium

Allowing to lapse, renewing or extending indefinitely the Moratorium on E-commerce; &

WTO Plurilaterals

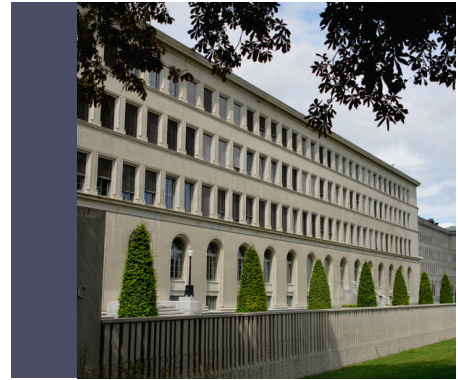
Clarifying the status of “WTO Plurilaterals” like Investment Facilitation for Development and their relationship to the WTO framework.

Most analysis suggests that a Ministerial that sees an amicable and constructive conversation which reaffirms the need for a WTO, and identifies some broad directions for a reform process would be as good an outcome as can be anticipated from the perspective of the multilateral trading system.



WTO Reform

Almost since the World Trade Organization (WTO)'s inception, there have been discussions about the need to 'reform' it.



Some members feel existing rules were insufficient, excessive or incorrectly calibrated.

Some members argue that procedures and practices could be strengthened or altered.

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The organization's commitment to decision-making by consensus and the difficulty of forging such a consensus in the face of strong disagreements among the membership have frustrated reform efforts to-date.

Heading into the 14th WTO Ministerial Conference the sense of urgency is exacerbated. The WTO's two-tier dispute settlement system is effectively suspended in-light of a United States blockade on new appointments to its Appellate Body. Major members including the United States and the European Union have questioned the fitness for purpose of the Most Favoured Nation Rule which stands as the organization's core tent. There is a growing sense that a rulebook written in 1940's and 1990's is falling behind the realities of modern trade.

There is little expectation that Ministers will resolve these and other outstanding issues in Cameroon. However, it is hoped that a consensus can emerge on a work program of reforms to guide officials in Geneva toward constructive deliberations following the Ministerial Conference.

A formal WTO Reform agenda was launched at the 12th WTO Ministerial Conference in Geneva. Ministers agreed to undertake a comprehensive review of the functioning of the WTO and committed to establishing a fully operational dispute settlement system accessible to all members by 2024. This commitment effectively transformed the reform debate from a series of competing proposals into a standing work programme within the WTO.



At the 13th WTO Ministerial Conference (MC13) in 2024, ministers reaffirmed the importance of WTO reform and endorsed continued work across these areas but did not deliver major institutional changes or a resolution on dispute settlement.

Since then, much of the work on WTO reform has been spearheaded by the General Council's facilitator on WTO Reform, Ambassador Petter Ølberg of Norway. Ambassador Ølberg has conducted extensive consultations with members. He has focused his work on three broadly defined areas:

1

Governance

Institutional Issues

Decision-making (including consensus), negotiating instruments, existing negotiations and agreements, and dispute settlement.

2

Fairness

Level Playing Field

Transparency, development, special and differential treatment (S&DT), market access (tariffs, reciprocity, and NTBs), subsidies, unfair practices, level playing field.

3

Issues of Our Time

New and Emerging Debates

Supply chain resilience, economic security, climate change, digital trade, and artificial intelligence.

These broad themes have guided the discussions among the membership, and the Ambassador's consultations. For the most part, the Ambassador reports good engagement across all three areas and a robust sharing of views - but there are no expectations of concrete outcomes or reforms at the Ministerial. Rather, it is hoped that Ministers may be able to endorse a mandate and work plan to shape the work of delegates in Geneva over coming years. This outcome is not guaranteed however.

Significant disagreements exist between members about the wording of such a mandate, its level of specificity, and where emphasis is placed. Longstanding debates around special and differential treatment, the Doha agenda, the role of plurilaterals and industrial policy could prevent a consensus landing zone.

If no reform mandate or work plan is agreed, the outcome of MC14 on this issue is likely to revert back to a 'Chair's Summary' issued on their personal recognisance. This would probably summarize discussions and suggest possible areas for work in Geneva, but lack the imprimatur of Ministerial endorsement. It would also be an unfortunate signal, marking the inability of the membership to even agree at the most abstract level about a future direction for the organization's evolution.

Reform conversations would almost certainly continue in Geneva in the absence of a work plan or document, but the odds of progress would be diminished.



Moratorium on E-Commerce

MC14 will decide if a prohibition on imposing tariffs on digitally delivered products expires, is temporarily renewed, or becomes permanent.

Since 1998, members of the World Trade Organization have maintained a moratorium on imposing tariffs on products delivered digitally. This includes software, music, films, and other content. Unlike most other WTO rules, the moratorium has historically been temporary - requiring renewal every two years. Thus far, this has occurred each time but passionate opposition from some members, most notably but not exclusively India, have become a common feature at recent Ministerials and latter extensions have been hard-won compromises.

At the upcoming 14th WTO Ministerial Conference, ministers will again face the question of whether to extend the moratorium. The decision will require balancing competing priorities: maintaining a predictable environment for digital trade while addressing concerns about revenue, development, and regulatory autonomy. As digital trade continues to expand, the debate over the moratorium has become a proxy for wider questions about how the multilateral trading system should respond to the digitalization of the global economy.

Supporters of the moratorium argue that:

- It helps preserve an open and predictable environment for the digital economy;
- Unravelling the moratorium would be a palpable retreat by the WTO rulebook;
- It encourages investment and entrepreneurship;
- Practically and equitably implementing digital tariffs would be very difficult;
- Compliance costs for business would be considerable;
- It would raise all manner of complex questions about how such transmissions could be valued or administered at the border.

Opponents of the moratorium argue that:

- It is an anachronism dating back to a time before technology enabled digital commerce at the volumes and values we know it today;
- It denies countries the ability to use tariffs to raise revenue from imports of digitally delivered products;
- It prevents governments using tariffs to shield their infant-industries in the digital content space from competition;
- The exporting companies that benefit from tariff free digital trade are concentrated in the developed world.

If the Moratorium is not extended, members will cease to be under an obligation not to impose tariffs on digitally delivered products - though many have already and separately agreed not to do so either in their Free Trade Agreements or through the E-Commerce Plurilateral. It is not inevitable that the end of the Moratorium would immediately, or indeed ever, see a flurry of new tariffs on the products in question - but the comparative certainty of a binding commitment not to impose them would be missing for a substantial segment of the membership.



WTO Plurilaterals

The 14th Ministerial Conference will see Members attempt to reach a consensus on the legal status and relationship to the WTO of so-called plurilateral initiatives, treaties negotiated between a subset of the membership - most notably the Investment Facilitation for Development Agreement (IFD) and E-Commerce Plurilaterals.

It is hoped Ministers at MC14 will make progress on the structurally difficult questions raised by the plurilateral initiatives: whether, and on what terms, these agreements can be incorporated into a system still formally governed by consensus and multilateralism.

Over the past decade, Joint Statement Initiatives (JSIs) have emerged, allowing subsets of members to advance rulemaking in areas such as e-commerce and investment facilitation. Negotiating plurilaterally allowed members to sidestep a lack of consensus to open negotiations in certain areas, and to move at a pace that perhaps not the entire membership is comfortable with. As plurilateral negotiations matured and eventually reached stabilized texts the question of their compatibility with the existing WTO framework became more acute.

The core political issue is therefore institutional: whether plurilaterals are a pragmatic adaptation to gridlock or a fragmentation of the WTO's member-driven, consensus-based architecture. If Plurilaterals are not formally incorporated into the WTO rulebook, their legal standing will be less secure and they will likely not be eligible for resolution through the WTO's dispute settlement system.



Investment Facilitation for Development (IFD)

#WTOIFD



The proposed Investment Facilitation for Development Agreement, backed by over 120 members, is expected to be tabled again for inclusion in the WTO rulebook after failing at MC13 due to opposition from several developing countries. Critics argue that incorporating agreements negotiated outside full multilateral participation risks undermining the “single undertaking” ethos and could allow coalitions of the willing to effectively bypass dissenting members. This raises systemic concerns about governance, precedent, transparency, and inclusivity.

ELECTRONIC COMMERCE AND DIGITAL TECHNOLOGIES

The plurilateral Joint Statement Initiative on e-commerce sharpens these tensions further. Substantively, it addresses highly consequential issues including data flows, localisation, digital trade facilitation, consumer protection, and the moratorium on customs duties on electronic transmissions, but members remain deeply divided on both content and approach.

Developing countries in particular worry about the extent to which its commitments restrict their policy space, regulatory sovereignty, and whether it sufficiently addresses the digital divide. Proponents emphasize the need for predictable global rules to support the rapidly expanding digital economy, the investment and supply chain attraction benefits of the agreement and how far the WTO rulebook has fallen behind modern technology.

At MC14, ministers will have to grapple with both the narrow question of the interplay between the IFD and E-commerce plurilaterals and the rules, but the broader question of plurilaterals and their status within the trading system.



International Chamber of Commerce (ICC) – Positions Ahead of MC14

The International Chamber of Commerce is following developments at the upcoming Ministerial Conference closely, given the profound impact changes in the multilateral system can and do have on the fate of businesses around the world.

In advance of MC14, the International Chamber of Commerce (ICC) has issued a series of position statements outlining its priorities for the multilateral trading system.

- ICC-led Global Business statement: **On behalf of hundreds of businesses;**
- ICC's call to action: **Revitalising the Multilateral Trading System: A Call for Action;**
- ICC brief: **The WTO's Hidden Value: How the Multilateral Trading System Delivers for Business Beyond Tariffs;**
- ICC report: **Study shows WTO collapse could slash exports of developing countries by 33 percent;**
- ICC note on the **WTO e-commerce moratorium;** and
- ICC brief: **Why services can't realistically be tariffed—and shouldn't be.**

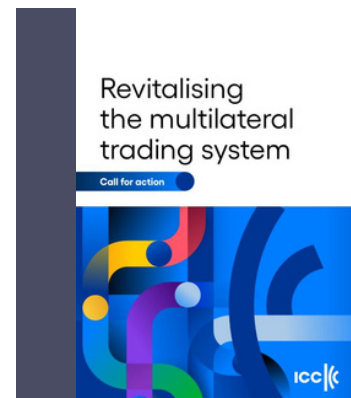
This note from the GTP synthesises those positions, but they are best appreciated in their original language and entirety through the links above.

ICC views MC14 as a critical juncture for the multilateral trading system, arguing that the WTO is under the kind of sustained strain which requires both immediate stabilization in the short term, and reform moving forward. Its central message is that the WTO's value extends far beyond tariffs, providing the legal certainty, transparency, and predictability that underpin everyday commerce for businesses of all sizes. ICC therefore calls on ministers to use MC14 to both preserve the system's core disciplines and initiate a structured process to modernise it.



Revitalising the multilateral trading system: Call for action

ICC's primary institutional recommendation on reform is the launch of a formal, time-bound WTO reform process. It argues progress in negotiating areas like industrial subsidies, agriculture, services, and digital trade will remain constrained unless members first address systemic issues such as decision-making practices, the role of plurilateral agreements, and the operation of special and differential treatment. It also stresses the need to embed business perspectives into WTO processes through structured and ongoing consultation mechanisms similar to those used in other international organisations.



Alongside reform, ICC stresses the need to preserve the existing system. It calls for a standstill during reform negotiations on new trade-restrictive measures that would violate WTO rules. It also suggests that members consider flexible approaches to cooperation, including forms of "variable geometry" that would allow subsets of members to move forward without undermining the multilateral framework.

The WTO's hidden value: How the multilateral trading system delivers for business beyond tariffs

A consistent theme is that the WTO's most important contributions are often indirect and therefore underappreciated. ICC notes that functions like transparency, intellectual property rules, trade facilitation and procurement disciplines collectively form an "invisible infrastructure" that enables businesses to operate across borders with confidence.



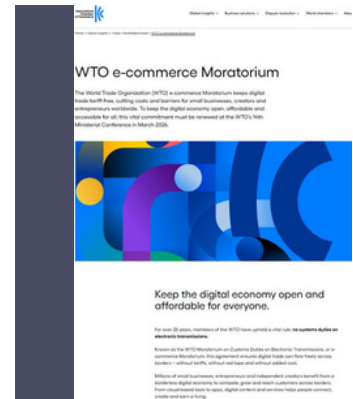
Study shows WTO collapse could slash exports of developing countries by 33 percent

ICC reinforces the importance of preserving this infrastructure by highlighting the potential costs of systemic failure. Drawing on modelling by Oxford Economics, it argues that a collapse of the WTO would result in a sharp contraction in global trade, with particularly severe impacts on developing economies.



WTO e-commerce moratorium

In this context, ICC identifies the Moratorium on Customs Duties on Electronic Transmissions as an immediate priority for MC14. It calls for its renewal and, more ambitiously, for its permanent adoption. Allowing it to lapse, in ICC’s view, would fragment the digital marketplace, increase compliance burdens, and raise the cost of digital tools and services. It emphasises that such impacts would fall disproportionately on small businesses, entrepreneurs, and consumers in developing countries, while generating limited fiscal benefits for governments and creating significant legal and technical uncertainty.




Why services can’t realistically be tariffed—and shouldn’t be

ICC extends this argument to services more broadly, contending that the application of tariffs to cross-border services is neither practical nor desirable. It argues that services lack the physical characteristics that make goods tariffable, noting the absence of clear border crossing points, classification systems equivalent to the Harmonized System, and reliable valuation methodologies. ICC therefore advocates maintaining tariff-free treatment for digitally delivered services and pursuing cooperative approaches to issues such as taxation through appropriate international frameworks rather than unilateral measures.



The Choices & Prospects for Developing and LDC members for MC14



The second ever Ministerial Conference in Africa will see Ministers confronted with a range of decision points of real significance to developing members, from WTO Reform to Plurilaterals and E-Commerce.

Suddha Chakravarti, Director, CUTS International, Geneva

WTO Reforms

MC14 is being pushed as a “reform ministerial” – however, the main objective at Yaoundé will not be to settle the reform talks, but to devise and endorse a process and workplan for post MC14 on WTO reforms. In doing so, developing/LDC members are being offered many but narrowed choices inside the reform work-plan that they largely did not design. They have broadly two choices: one is to accept the facilitator driven roadmap that will largely defer any binding choices to MC15, or they push back and try to re-anchor the conversations around reform in development and dispute settlements.



The reform agenda leading up to MC14 is being driven by a facilitator led and non-negotiated drafts that some are criticizing as normalizing a certain framing of WTO reforms without adequately addressing the Doha era development issues and dispute settlement. Furthermore, some developing/LDC members are also voicing their objections on the three reform pillars as disproportionately targeting developing/LDC interests – whereas concerns by developing/LDC members for a fully restored two-tier dispute settlement system and agricultural issues get less prominence.

The three reform pillars envisaged from where choices/prospects for developing/LDC members arise are (1) Decision Making/Plurilaterals, (2) Development and Special and Differential Treatment (S&DT), and (3) Level Playing Field/ Fairness.

On Decision Making/Plurilateral – the Facilitator drafts seek recognition in the event when full consensus is not available, groups of members can advance their agendas through plurilaterals. For some developing/LDC members this would mean accepting language that could potentially normalize plurilaterals and pose a risk to consensus driven decision making in the WTO and thereby limit their de-facto veto power. What developing/LDC members could do is to block or condition elements that could erode the single undertaking, MFN, and consensus decision making - or they could risk creating a permanent divide between developed and developing members. On the other hand, resisting such reform movements could lead to developing/LDC members being seen as blocking modernization of the WTO, and risks derailing any positive movements in the MTS.

On Development and Special and Differential Treatment (S&DT) – while one reform track tries to ensure that all developing members receive the full benefits of the WTO system, there are others proposing to differentiate amongst developing members and to revisit blanket S&DT. Here, developing/LDC members face a trade-off – where on one hand they could preserve the broad self-designation and S&DT architecture, or, accept new differentiations. A choice that developing/LDC members have is to support the G-90 revised drafts on the precise and effective implementation of S&DT in SPS and TBT agreements (already broad convergence achieved), as well as TRIPS Art. 66.2 on technology transfer that is still under discussions. Developing members can also seek to advance the standalone LDC-specific package drafted by the Gambia on behalf of the LDC Group (WT/GC/W/979/Rev.1), including the smooth graduation transition measures for LDCs graduating to developing status.

On Level Playing Field/Fairness – reform agendas from major industrialized players like the EU call for stricter disciplines on notifications, transparency, and on subsidies and industrial policy. For developing/LDC members, this choice is restricted to signing up to the above at the expense of their own policy space. On the other hand, they may also seek to bolster their policy space by advocating that any new disciplines should be matched by real movements in the development agenda (agriculture, public stockholding, et alia).



Here, the developing/LDC members can advance the proposal by the African Group (pWT/GC/W/992 of March 05, 2026) for reforms that safeguard the development dimension and policy space for industrialization, diversification, agriculture/food security, technology transfer, structural transformation, and market access. For developing and LDC members, prospects are modestly positive if they are able to maintain unity through the African Group, G-90, and LDC Group and are able to proactively shape the reform agenda in post MC14 work plan around their development priorities. On one hand, developing and LDC members can endorse a ministerial reform declaration (along with a work-plan) where they can lock-in a future reform roadmap that embodies a structured review of S&DT/development status and LDC needs; a renewed exploration of plurilaterals and flexible decision making; and a work stream on transparency and industrial policy. On the other hand, they can push back and narrowly condition the reform mandate by re-anchoring the narrative in Doha and dispute settlement.



Plurilaterals Agreements

There are two significant plurilateral initiatives that are up for discussions at MC14: the Investment Facilitation for Development Agreement (IFD) and the Joint Statement Initiative (JSI) on E-Commerce. Out of these two initiatives arises the larger question of the place of plurilateral initiatives in the future of the WTO.

1

Investment Facilitation for Development (IFD)

The main objective of the IFD Agreement is to make foreign direct investment more predictable and efficient for participating countries. By streamlining administrative processes for investment applications and authorizations, it promotes cooperation between governments and investors and encourages investment in developing countries. This initiative is supported by 128 WTO members, (including 91 developing economies, 27 of which are LDCs) plus business lobbies and key donors.

Although the IFD is “the most mature file” on the table, the current signals seem to suggest that MC14 will not be successful in incorporating IFD into Annex 4. At the same time members will also try to have a face-saving outcome by not killing it entirely in order to show “movement” even without formal Annex 4 incorporation. The main reason behind the non-incorporation of the IFD is that it will require the explicit consensus amongst all members under Art. X:9, and members like India, South Africa (and a few others) have had long standing systemic objections and resistance towards “plurilateralization” of the WTO.



What we can expect at MC14 is a political acknowledgement of the IFD Agreement in a ministerial declaration or side statement – affirming its support and intent, and inviting further accession, by adopting language signaling that participants will continue to work towards its WTO integration.

For developing/LDC members – the choices/prospects at MC14 are as follows: the supporters of the IFD will gain momentum and a symbolic victory. This could interest other developing/LDC members to join the agreement, thereby putting pressure on the members blocking its incorporation. The opponents will most likely succeed in blocking the Annex 4 incorporation, but at the same time they may not push to stop the IFD from consolidating a parallel plurilateral track. Failure would mean another two years of unsuccessful attempts, and potentially other avenues being considered for implementing these ideals. Regardless of the outcome, the decision regarding the IFD Agreement will signal the broader role of plurilateral agreements in the WTO going forward.

2**Joint Statement Initiative (JSI) on E-Commerce**

With regard to the plurilateral proposal for dealing with e-commerce regulations, a Joint Statement Initiative on e-commerce was proposed by a group of 71 members (that later grew to 91 members) during MC11 - which evolved into a stable legal text for a proposed Agreement on Electronic Commerce. Among other things, this Agreement includes a permanent prohibition on customs on electronic transmissions among participating parties. Critics of this initiative include several developing countries who argue that it permanently entrenches a digital tariff moratorium without allowing for development flexibilities or technical assistance. Concerns have also been raised warning against a systemic shift to plurilateral agreements in the WTO and what this might mean for other multilateral programs such as the WPEC. Those who support the initiative say that it is necessitated as a result of the fragmentation caused by increasing bilateral and regional digital trade agreements.

Similar to the IFD, most scenarios predict toward the non-incorporation of the JSI on e-commerce at MC14 as an Annex 4 plurilateral due to the systemic objection of some developing members. But at the same time, members will most likely not derail it. A political acknowledgement in the form of “taking note of” is the most likely outcome for this JSI, while members will keep debating on the future of moratorium and the WPEC. Therefore, the implications for developing/LDC members apropos the JSI on e-commerce will be very similar to the IFD. The opponents to the JSI will probably block its incorporation into a WTO agreement. In doing so, they will seek to preserve their policy space and their political leverage in the moratorium discussions. On the other hand, they will keep prioritizing the multilateral WPEC rather than joining the JSI.

On the other hand, supporters of the JSI will most likely announce their agreement amongst themselves. This could probably manifest through a joint ministerial statement, as well as a



commitment to implement the JSI as a stand-alone plurilateral that is not a part of the WTO. Hence, the supporters may still get a plurilateral deal they can implement but devoid of the legal and systemic backing they had hoped for.



E-Commerce

Apart from the JSI on e-commerce, discussed before, there are three main MC14 agenda items pertaining to e-commerce: the WTO Moratorium on the Imposition of Customs Duties on Electronic Transmissions; the Work Program on E-Commerce (WPEC); and the proposed establishment of a digital trade/e-commerce body. The Moratorium on Customs Duties on Electronic Transmissions has been in place since 1998 and is a multilateral commitment that prohibits members from placing tariffs on digital goods and services. Decisions regarding the moratorium and all other digital trade related issues have been discussed through the Work Program on E-Commerce (WPEC), which, like the moratorium, is set to expire after MC14. The moratorium and WPEC have been extended every year since their creation and aim to foster unfettered digital trade. This March, WTO members must grapple with the question of another consensus-based extension at MC14.

Two draft proposals for Ministerial Decisions were circulated in November of 2025 that encapsulate two possible ways forward. The first draft proposal, submitted by Barbados in coordination with the ACP Group, called for the reinvigoration of the WPEC, a commitment to further analyzing the effect of the moratorium on developing countries, and the extension of the moratorium for another year. This proposal would emphasize technical assistance and capacity building for developing and LDC members and would place the emphasis on helping them benefit from the growing e-commerce industry in the future.

Additionally, hundreds of chambers of commerce and business associations from every region of the world have signed the ICC-led Global Business Statement, which calls for the launch of a structured, time-bound WTO reform process and the renewal of the moratorium, warning that failure on either front would deepen fragmentation of the multilateral trading system and raise costs for businesses — particularly MSMEs — operating across borders.



Apart from the moratorium and the WPEC, another matter that is being nudged is the digital trade/e-commerce body that is being pitched to centralize all discussions that are now scattered under the WPEC. This is being proposed to provide an institutional home for all issues pertaining to digital trade. However, what might be irksome for some developing/LDC members is that if the body results in the shift of discussions away from development and capacity building mandate (from the MC13 E-Commerce Decision) to other novel and softer disciplines like AI, data flows, taxation, localization, and platforms – pressuring developing/LDC members to converge on issues and rules that they are not ready to adopt.

To conclude, what we can foresee on the table apropos choices and prospects for developing/LDC members at MC14 are as follows:

- **On the moratorium**, developing/LDC members will most likely agree to support the practice on a temporary basis with an extension till MC15. Chances are that they will use the same language as in MC13.
- **On the WPEC**, developing/LDC members will mostly support the renewal of the WPEC extension, as the work program includes a development and capacity building dimension that are important for them.
- **On the digital trade/e-commerce body**, as mentioned before – developing/LDC members seek to lose out if novel and softer issues are prioritized over their developmental needs. However, they may also benefit from it as it prioritizes targeted technical assistance and financing for digital capacities, as well as MSME integration. Therefore, they could support it as a political compromise if their development and capacity building goals are not dissolved.
- The worst-case scenario for developing/LDC members will be if there is a failure to negotiate the WPEC extension compounded by the failure to commit towards the formation of the digital trade/e-commerce body.



Geopolitics Comes to Geneva: The WTO's Fractured Membership and the Fate of the Multilateral Trading System

The 14th WTO Ministerial Conference is taking place at a time when trade is at the heart of geopolitics and geopolitics is shaping trade - decisions made by the membership in Yaounde will shape the future of a multilateral trading system.

Inu Manak, Senior Fellow for International Trade, Council on Foreign Relations



The world is moving fast. In the face of war, geoeconomic tensions, and challenges to international institutions, governments are struggling to adapt to a new era that is largely being shaped by power politics. This is turning even the most mundane international gatherings into anxiety-inducing affairs. The World Trade Organization's 14th Ministerial Conference, set to take place March 26-29, 2026, is no exception.

The biannual meeting of trade ministers is typically the setting where the institution's members meet to squabble over one to two pages of text, modestly advance global trade relations, and jockey over who is responsible for saving the day at the eleventh hour. Despite the drama that is often captured by intrepid reporters chasing down a provocative sound bite, for the most part, these meetings are mostly dull and technocratic. But with the United States causing an earthquake throughout the global trading system since President Donald J. Trump's return to office, this time could be different.



This is not just because the United States has broken the foundational norms of the institution it helped create by ignoring its tariff commitments and using economic coercion to force a growing number of its trading partners to offer asymmetric concessions, including tariff reductions, regulatory alignment, and investments, to name a few. It is also because other countries, with the exception of China and a few others, have been unwilling to resist U.S. bullying. This sets the stage for a ministerial conference that will be mired in geopolitics, and perhaps the first in a long time that will not end with every member breathing a sigh of relief.

Just as some countries scrambled to eke out a thin deal with the United States after Trump announced sweeping tariffs on allies and adversaries alike on April 2, 2025, some members are likely to lower their ambitions on true reform at MC14. Meanwhile, others may take a principled stand in defense of the organization, but be simply unwilling or unable to do what is necessary to preserve it. In fact, in the lead-up to the meeting, WTO members seem to be coalescing into five groups: the challengers, the bystanders, the incrementalists, the tempered, and the rearguard. The interaction of these groups will seal the fate of the global trading system.

First up are the challengers – the United States and China.

As one Geneva-based official put it, the United States strikes a “notably different tone from many other Members,” and has argued to dispense with process and “instead focus on delivering concrete results.” The United States has repeatedly called on other countries to put forward proposals, but aside from a few novel suggestions from the first Trump administration, has neither offered new ideas nor constructively engaged with pragmatic proposals put forward by others. Then there’s China, which falsely paints itself as the defender of the system, while routinely failing to live up to its commitments. China has called for “respect” for “members’ distinct economic systems,” which can be read as suggesting noninterference in its state-directed economy. This puts the United States and China in an uncomfortable tension, because the core of the U.S. grievance against the WTO is that it was not designed to absorb non-market economies that could take advantage of

The second group are the bystanders,

which largely make up the smaller, mostly developing economies hoping to avoid getting caught in the cross-fire. Many of these countries do not want to have to pick and choose sides and are worried about losing critical market access to support their continued growth. This group includes countries such as the LDC group, the Africa group, and some Caribbean nations.



The third group are the incrementalists,

which are unwilling to commit to a clear pathway for reform and instead prefer to keep conversations open-ended, allowing for maximum flexibility in bargaining. These countries are betting that the current crisis of the institution is a passing moment that they can wait out, but also one where they can stall on multilateral progress in favor of bilateral opportunities. Countries in this group include Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, and Türkiye. Each has their own set of interests with the United States and China, with some even pursuing loosely organized deals with the United States to preserve some degree of market access. These countries do not want to rock the boat, though many feel confident that they can ride out the storm.

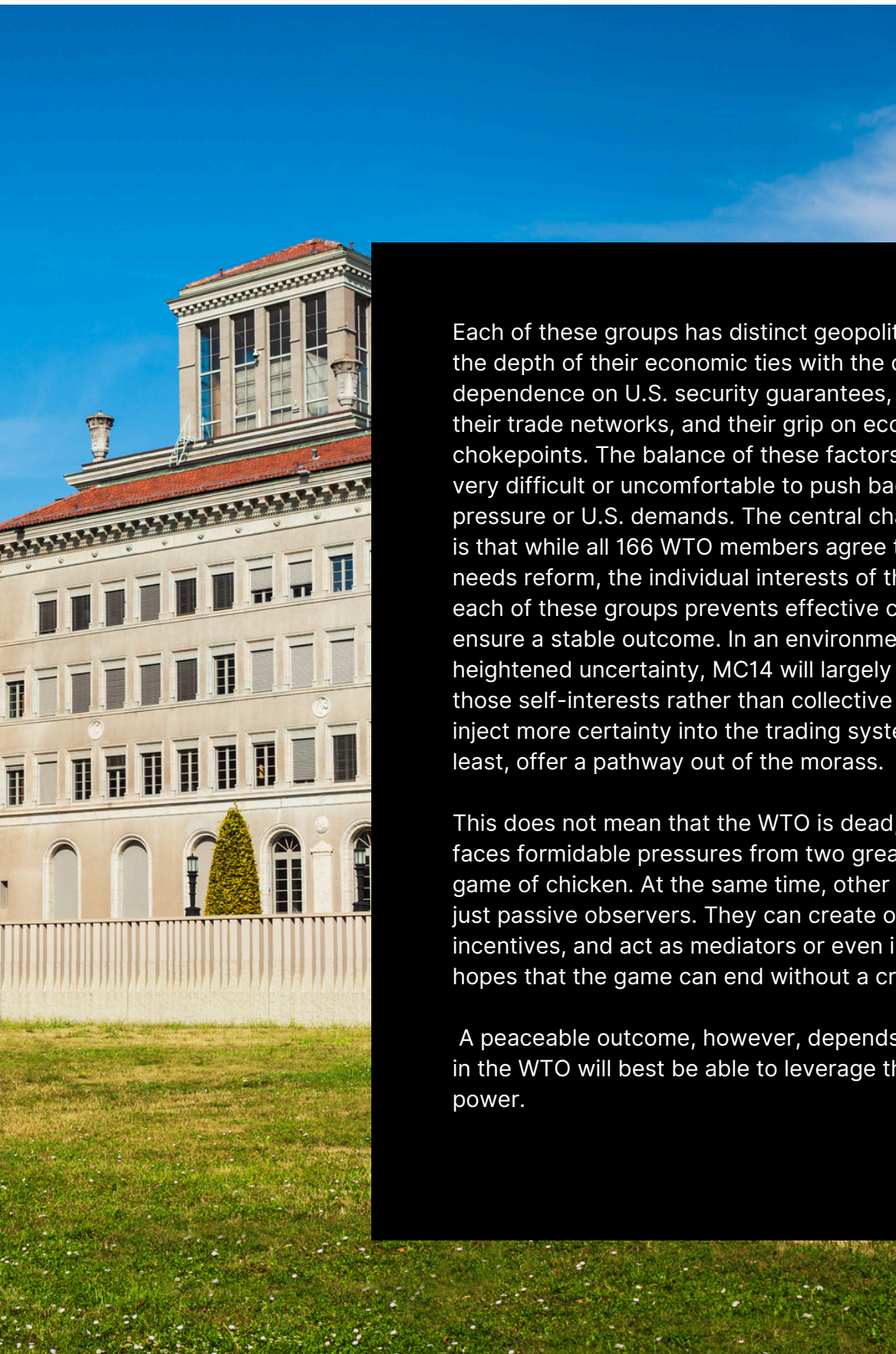
The fourth group are the tempered countries

who are supportive of a compromise outcome that produces a balanced ministerial statement and a work plan that members can chip away at in Geneva well after the ministerial meeting. These countries are perhaps the most supportive of Ambassador Ølberg's efforts as reform facilitator to secure such a result. They are also caught between the United States and China, but genuinely hope to advance reform in the next few years because the economic pressures they are facing are significant, and they have less leverage to push back on the United States' demands for trade policy alignment. These include countries such as Mexico, Norway, Singapore, and South Korea.

Finally, the fifth group is the rearguard

which are pushing for an ambitious reform process and are deeply committed to preserving a rules-based trading system. This does not mean that they are unwilling to change the system, but that they are instead looking to improve what clearly does not work, establish new rules where they are needed, while simultaneously maintaining the foundational norms that ensure that trade relations do not further devolve into pure power politics. These are members such as Australia, Canada, the European Union, Japan, New Zealand, and Switzerland. These trading partners are steadfast allies of the United States but are in fundamental disagreement over the role of the WTO in the global economy and the value of multilateralism.





Each of these groups has distinct geopolitical concerns – the depth of their economic ties with the challengers, their dependence on U.S. security guarantees, the diversity of their trade networks, and their grip on economic chokepoints. The balance of these factors makes it either very difficult or uncomfortable to push back against Chinese pressure or U.S. demands. The central challenge, however, is that while all 166 WTO members agree that the institution needs reform, the individual interests of the members in each of these groups prevents effective coalition building to ensure a stable outcome. In an environment of such heightened uncertainty, MC14 will largely be shaped by those self-interests rather than collective efforts that could inject more certainty into the trading system, or at the very least, offer a pathway out of the morass.

This does not mean that the WTO is dead, but rather that it faces formidable pressures from two great powers playing a game of chicken. At the same time, other members are not just passive observers. They can create off-ramps, alter incentives, and act as mediators or even influencers in the hopes that the game can end without a crash.

A peaceable outcome, however, depends on which faction in the WTO will best be able to leverage their collective power.



Read Further

All WTO Documents

The World Trade Organization

https://www.wto.org/english/thewto_e/minist_e/mc14_e/documents_e.htm

The WTO has compiled all publicly available documents regarding MC14 in one place.

MC14 and the Future of Trade Cooperation

International Institute for Sustainable Development (IISD)

<https://www.iisd.org/articles/deep-dive/iisd-trade-sustainability-review-march-2026-mc14>

A comprehensive briefing from IISD ahead of the Ministerial Conference, with deep dives on many of the major issues.

Treading water—what to expect at the Yaoundé WTO Conference

Trade β Blog

Part 1: <https://tradebetablog.wordpress.com/2026/03/17/mc14-treading-water-1-expect/>

Part 2: <https://tradebetablog.wordpress.com/2026/03/18/mc14-treading-water-2-reform/>

Part 3: <https://tradebetablog.wordpress.com/2026/03/19/mc14-treading-water-3-drowning/>

A three part deep dive from WTO Secretariat veteran Peter Ungphakorn on everything on the agenda at the Ministerial Conference, and its implications.



MC14 Issue Guide

About Geneva Trade Platform (GTP)

We are an independent, non-partisan platform dedicated to supporting the inclusivity and effectiveness of the trade policy conversation in Geneva, and around the world.

Housed within the Geneva Graduate Institute's Centre for Trade and Economic Integration, we operate with a small secretariat to bring the resources and convening power of the Institute together with donor funds to address challenges to the international trade policy conversation.

You can find more information about the Geneva Trade Platform and how to collaborate with us on our [website](#).

Authors

Suddha Chakravarti, Director, CUTS International, Geneva
Dmitry Grozoubski, Executive Director, Geneva Trade Platform

Inu Manak, Senior Fellow for International Trade, Council on Foreign Relations

Graphic Design

Joanita Kalibala, Events and Communications Manager, Geneva Trade Platform

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Contact Us

Email

info@genevatradeplatform.org

Website

genevatradeplatform.org

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