

WTO Reform: What Hope for MC14?

TaPP Network Workshop: Insight Note

Monday 8 December 2025

The 14th World Trade Organization (WTO) Ministerial Conference (MC14) is set to take place in Yaoundé, Cameroon between 26 – 29 March 2026. The Ministerial Conference meets at least once every two years and is the highest decision-making body at the WTO. It provides a key opportunity for ministers and senior officials from the Organization's 166 members to take decisions that will respond to challenges facing the global trading system.

TaPP held a workshop on Monday 8 December to discuss the prospects for MC14, the likelihood of agreement between the members, and what its priorities might be. While there is general agreement that the WTO needs reform ([a process currently led by Ambassador Ølberg](#)) what this looks like is unclear.

The workshop brought together senior diplomats, government officials, civil society, business, and academic experts. In particular, we heard from HE Matthew Wilson, Permanent Representative and Ambassador of Barbados to the WTO, United Nations Office, and other International Organisations in Geneva. Coordinator of the ACP Geneva Group, and TaPP member Prof Stefanie Rickard (LSE).

Context

Both MC12 and MC13 called for reform: as such, a 'reform' Ministerial is not new. However, in the current climate the need for reform clearly feels different. In the run-up to MC14, the actions of the US regarding tariffs and other long-standing tensions have come to the fore. Facing these challenges, it is important to understand the value of the WTO, and to note that this value is not universally acknowledged. These elements are linked: it is important to keep promoting the benefits of the WTO and its contributions throughout any process of reform. The rules-based multilateral trading system needs to sit at the core of a reform agenda, along with ongoing small improvements that have proved so far to make a difference.

Throughout the process of reform, it has been important to take an informed approach, learning from what we have done before, and recognising where

WTO members have succeeded in making the WTO engaged and useful to the international community.

In the run-up to MC14, three questions are vital to address: how can the WTO be more flexible and open to outside voices? How can we maintain this flexibility while also ensuring we get reforms over the line? How can we have a system that all members will see as helping their growth?

HE Matthew Wilson, Permanent Representative and Ambassador of Barbados to the WTO, United Nations Office, and other International Organisations in Geneva. Coordinator of the ACP Geneva Group.

The multilateral trading system is being threatened and antagonised in ways it has not faced before. The World Trade Organisation as a Secretariat has been impacted in terms of insecure funding, and a questioning of mandates and the role of the Secretariat. WTO members are diverging from the traditional WTO rulebook as can be seen in the newly released US national security statement and the EU's possible consideration of national security and move away from MFN.

It is likely that the global situation will continue following this trend, meaning the WTO must adapt and evolve or risk being left behind. WTO reform cuts across large-scale, long-term questions as well as micro-level issues that can be tackled through small changes in practice. Reform was supposed to be addressed at MC13 but there was a lack of drive on key issues such as multilateral negotiations, decision-making and agenda setting. This makes MC14 even more crucial.

There have been shifting priorities and views on what should be on the agenda for MC14 and differing opinions regarding which topics should be discussed and take priority. For example, some feel that consensus decision making should be at the centre while others believe the consensus principle or practice is not the most important issue. On Special and differential treatment (SDT) some want a discussion that is essentially around differentiation while others view SDT as a treaty bound right that should not be reduced. What is clear is that the US will disengage (though not pull out of the WTO) if they do not see movement on the issues they care about.

Regarding consensus practice, it is clear that no one wants to move to voting even though it is a viable option in decision-making. Some large countries fear a move to voting would be to their disadvantage. The focus is perhaps best placed on the 'process of decision making' and how we negotiate. The question of plurilaterals is also expected to be discussed. There is a growing recognition that there is a need to find solutions to unblock the current impasse on plurilaterals such as the IFD.

Special and differential treatment (SDT) is also being discussed. Overall, it seems no one wants to do away with SDT, yet many African, Caribbean, and Pacific countries are concerned about it being undermined given that SDT is enshrined as a treaty-bound right in the architecture of the WTO. However, some are open to discuss how SDT is determined, delivered, and defined. For example, some countries like Costa Rica, Singapore, and China have stated that they will not benefit from SDT in the future. However, this decision should be approached cautiously and not taken as an absolute, noting Brazil's previous administration's decision not to use SDT which has since been reversed by the new administration.

Some of the solutions put forward in regards to SDT pose issues. For example, a criteria-based approach to assessing SDT has been discussed, however this raises many questions: smaller states have noted that using GDP per capita does not take into account other factors, such as vulnerability. Others advocate for needs-based assessments but this then raises the question of who has the right to determine need, and by what metric would it be measured. The opt-out principal is broadly agreed as an option, as demonstrated by China's opt-out.

Another key issue being discussed at the moment is trust. Trust is very difficult to quantify or qualify. We also need to distinguish between the act of breaking trust and the disagreement with certain decisions: countries cannot be faulted for having their own positions- this cannot equate to a breach of trust. Fairness is also a phrase that has been increasingly used from the perspective of 'level playing field'. Some believe that a discussion on fairness must be premised on the knowledge of factual, evidence-based, historical and structural imbalances.

It is time to rethink what we understand as a successful WTO Ministerial: a successful Ministerial does not have to focus on always delivering multilateral trade rules. It is unproductive to label Ministerials 'failures' simply for not agreeing to large new agreements. Instead, we need maintain a positive but realistic narrative that does not risk killing the momentum of reform. This would mean a different kind of Ministerial to what we are accustomed to, knowing that it is not going to deliver anything substantial on agriculture, fish, and dispute settlement mechanisms this time.

It is possible that there will be agreement on a key issue - an e-commerce moratorium - as the one item that both the US and the wider business community have said they are eager to progress. The African, Caribbean, and Pacific Group have suggested a temporary rollover of the moratorium while the US has asked for a permanent moratorium, so there are different views. Beyond MC14, it is possible that some members will want a halfway mark

before MC15 to review the reform agenda and take the temperature on developments.

Overall, the world without the WTO is undesirable. It would be a more unpredictable world, impacting small and mid-size trading countries like Barbados and the UK hugely. It would be welcome to see ministers sitting around the table with no prepared statements, discussing contemporary issues at hand and giving a clear direction of elements of a reform programme that need to be taken forward in Geneva in a clear, focused and realistic way.

In this sense, the TaPP Network could be useful by way of developing model scenarios that demonstrate the potential implications of decision making e.g. laying out what is likely to happen if an e-commerce agreement were a temporary or permanent deal, and what would this mean for the WTO? Additionally, TaPP is a great place to launch questions regarding new issues that the WTO should be addressing, and brainstorming ways to get everyone around the table and talking again.

Stephanie Rickard, Professor of Political Economy, London School of Economics.

Current estimates are that if the WTO ceased to function the global economy would shrink by 5-7%¹. For context, Covid-19 shrunk the global economy by 3%. This demonstrates the importance of reforms that will keep the WTO functioning and credible. Reform is a long-standing topic at the WTO. This is a good thing, as institutions need to evolve. But it also means negotiations need to evolve to reflect interests of states and current realities, especially now when the global situation feels more fragile than before.

The fragility of the WTO can be explained by three main factors. First, recent technology developments, specifically AI, have massively changed conversations around e-commerce and digital trade. This demands the rapid development of evolution and response policies. Second, large structural changes in the global economy and global politics mean the WTO is caught in a crossfire where there is an increasing external pressure for reform that must be addressed, yet will not be able to remedy issues caused by global shifts and changes that are not inherent to the WTO. For example, the rise of China and its huge increase in economic growth and exports has engendered lots of concerns and pressure for reform. The responses of different states to the rise of China then causes further concern, for example, the US's perception of China as a threat has contributed massively to domestic policy decisions which have in turn generated backlash in the WTO. These are not issues that the WTO

¹ <https://www.ft.com/content/2ff1d4ce-4d63-4776-8e8c-ace6b3509f24>;
<https://www.oxfordeconomics.com/resource/the-economic-impact-of-abandoning-the-wto/>

can directly solve but nonetheless must respond to in some capacity. And lastly, there are issues surrounding the lack of trust in the WTO. There are concerns that countries are not committed to WTO rules and multilateral agreements, as well as a recognition of China structuring its economy very differently and taking a very different approach to domestic economic governance to most WTO member states. We are also seeing the US making decisions about the multilateral system based on the thinking that, with the rise of China, the benefits of upholding multilateral obligations may not outweigh the cost.

Trust is at the heart of a lot of issues that makes negotiating difficult. No country wants to be the only country abiding by the rules while others do not, meaning states are disincentivised to keep tariffs at the boundary if their trading partners are raising tariffs. So, it is important to think about ways to rebuild trust. Empirical models have proven that a rich information environment can help engender trust². This means working on transparency is a worthwhile part of WTO reform. This could be done in multiple ways. First, the WTO could be more transparent regarding its own internal workings. Second, members could be more transparent at home by, for example, being clearer on their intended direction of development. Additionally, incentivising members to be more vigilant with notifications, or potentially making things conditional on notifications could promote transparency and increased information sharing.

Discussion

The wider discussion that followed focussed on the extent to which WTO reform efforts sought to manage long-term problems - or pressing current issues, such as US tariffs.

One common thread was how the appetite to reform was consistent across member, even though they approached the topic from different viewpoints and with (at times dramatically) different priorities.

Part of the discussion focused on the practice of decision-making at the WTO, and its place on the reform agenda. Alternative modes of decision making, that are neither voting or consensus based, were pitched. While different models of consensus were noted also, for example, in the international standards system, where consensus is understood as the absence of *sustained* opposition.

Special and differential treatment was also discussed, with the danger of getting stuck in definitional discussions and debates raised as a risk. Among the

² <https://doi.org/10.1080/21515581.2017.1289100>; <https://doi.org/10.1080/1062726X.2014.908722>;
<https://doi.org/10.1080/21515581.2022.2060245>

different issues raised, the participants noted the importance of being able distinguish between members in different positions was important but that this did not necessarily track economic metrics (for example, vulnerability to climate change).

Finally, the discussion highlighted external views of the WTO. There is significant external pressure for MC14 to reach new landmark conclusions at risk of being labelled defunct should these not materialise. However, this was not considered to be the case – and the public messaging of ‘do or die’ was both risky and inaccurate. While people outside of the WTO demand explanations of how and why it is still relevant and useful, this could only come from the institution – which is to say, its members.