



Re-Examining Plurilateral Approaches Following the WTO's Recent Ministerial Conference in Cameroon

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SYNOPSIS

Negotiations at the World Trade Organization (WTO) are well known for being technical, complex, and fraught with opposing national positions. Most states value the WTO and wish to contribute to it but cannot afford to let impasses hold back their trading and economic security needs. A plurilateral agreement is the "Plan B" way to move forward.

COMMENTARY

The 14th World Trade Organization Ministerial Conference (MC14), held in Yaoundé, Cameroon, concluded in March amid [criticism](#) and [some acrimony](#), suggesting it was a step down from the [disappointing MC13](#) two years earlier. Initially intended as a "reform" conference focused on improving WTO processes, the MC14 produced no substantive outcomes, such as a negotiating text, although ministers did engage in such discussions. Longstanding issues, such as agriculture, have once again failed to make any progress,

Instead, the MC14's tangible outputs focused on adopting a post-conference work programme on reform and long-standing agricultural issues. The attempt to focus on tangible, modern digital and e-Commerce issues ran into problems that led to unexpected outcomes. A silver lining may be seen in procedural modality shifts towards achieving incremental consensus, even as larger goals remain distant.

A Mixed Bag of Outcomes

Notably, the WTO Moratorium on Customs Duties on Electronic Transmissions, commonly known as the "eCommerce moratorium", in place since 1997, which prevents tariffs on digitally traded goods, was not renewed. This risks nascent drives

for growth in borderless digital economies, covering trade in digital products, facing the imposition of tariffs by some fellow WTO members.

At the same time, as the proposed text on eCommerce regulations could not be adopted by all WTO members, 66 WTO members have agreed to pursue work on electronic commerce to establish a common regulatory framework governing eCommerce trade among these members. Although technically outside of the WTO, this plurilateral approach towards achieving a common regulatory text for WTO members was hailed as a success of MC14. It would aim to harmonise trade rules across multiple jurisdictions, which would be especially helpful for small and medium enterprises (SMEs) that lack the scale and legal capacity to implement multi-jurisdictional compliance.

Geopolitics and Trade Negotiations

Viewed from the global perspective, the lack of progress may seem disappointing. However, one should be mindful that the geopolitical underpinnings of these processes have shifted dramatically in recent years. Against a backdrop of power rivalry and unilateral policymaking, underscored by limited stakeholder engagement, it is unsurprising that countries are digging in on national positions and becoming much more uncompromising – at least outwardly.

In a [statement on the outcome of the E-Commerce agreement](#), Singapore's Minister-in-charge of Trade Relations and Minister for Sustainability and the Environment, Grace Fu, highlighted "the WTO's indispensable role in the multilateral trading system." While cynics might argue that some WTO members were a cause of frictions around the agreement, the important point is that the WTO provided the convening platform, an opportunity for all members to engage, and a tangible deadline to move the text forward.

Some have raised concerns that truly inclusive global platforms may become increasingly scarce if plurilateralism becomes not merely an alternative but the primary mode of engagement. The plurilateral attraction is stark; critical mass is more readily achieved within these frameworks, where delegates can more effectively reach out to counterparts and address niggling issues directly. Whilst it is indeed tempting to pursue plurilateral outcomes, Minister Fu's remarks remind us that the global meeting remains indispensable, offering opportunities, particularly for small states, to come together and negotiate high-level agreements. This, after all, was the vision of the Uruguay Round that established the WTO. Current politics, however, has overshadowed this modality, resulting in limited single-undertaking trade-off opportunities.

Trade Arrangements Outside the WTO

The WTO, whilst the only global trade framework, is not the only modality via which countries can agree on new trade rules. Its current difficulties have spurred a proliferation of alternative unilateral or plurilateral frameworks that still use the WTO rules as their foundation. It is only over the last 12 months that we have seen a surge

in bilateral agreements, which, unlike the E-Commerce agreement, do not necessarily make WTO rules their primary reference point.

While the former are intended to be transparent and legally binding, the recent slew of US-led deals under the Agreement on Reciprocal Trade (ART) are only contractually structured “deals” bilaterally, without general rules or institutionalisation. This is distinct from bilateral or regional free trade agreements (FTAs) that many other countries have negotiated, which provide for WTO-plus provisions and a recourse to dispute settlement.

Whilst the ART approach may offer flexibility in partnerships and freedom of action, including perceived immediate gains, it has limitations compared with WTO mechanisms and more traditional binding bilateral or plurilateral agreements, such as the slew of Free Trade Agreements (FTAs) currently in place. Singapore was a practical first mover, embracing the Multilateral Trading System (MTS) and embarking on an FTA strategy in 1999, following the disappointing outcome of the Seattle WTO Ministerial.

Multilateral Arrangements Remain Relevant

At the Davos World Economic Forum in January 2026, [President Tharman Shanmugaratnam](#) alluded to this as Singapore’s pragmatism while adhering to a rules-based system. He referred to “Plan A” (multilateralism) and “Plan B” (plurilaterals) to ensure that progress remains possible while states in the formal multilateral structures deliberate on their differences.

This “Plan A” framing reiterates that multilateralism remains the preferred route, but nimble states are prepared to move if things are stuck. Put differently, obstructionist actors will not succeed in holding back arrangements; they will merely miss out on the comparative advantages that those flexible states believe are available.

The often-overlooked point is that even in plurilateral arrangements, there is limited scope to apply regulations only to fellow plurilateral members. Regulations are incorporated into domestic law and apply uniformly on a Most Favoured Nation (MFN) basis, even to non-plurilateral parties. This is different from market access commitments for which there can be differentiated treatment at the WTO MTS level vs the FTA Plurilateral preferential market access provisions.

These de facto MFN applied regulations bode well for SMEs, provided there is adequate transparency about what they are and how they impact cross-border business. Moreover, the impact and reach of multilateral agreements remain superior to those of smaller arrangements. As the 66 WTO members post-MC14 move forward with their plurilateral eCommerce agreement, it would be timely to note that many of these regulations are already part of existing digital economy regulatory frameworks, which were designed to set standards useful to a far wider range of entities, enabling greater adoption.

This is the focus of digital economy agreements, such as the Digital Economy Partnership Agreements (DEPAs), which are reviewing new members, and of the

Digital Economy Framework Agreement (DEFA), which is being negotiated within ASEAN. As some of the 66 members are also engaged in these other regional negotiations, maintaining this wider view of agreements that contribute to, rather than diverge from, the global level should be an essential practice as plurilaterals develop.

This new approach by these 66 WTO members thus bears watching. It is also not dissimilar to the approaches taken in earlier GATT negotiating rounds before the establishment of the WTO. Drawing on past approaches could help us continue the much-needed work during these current geopolitical times.

If MC14 is deemed a disappointment in terms of new textual outcomes, it should refocus our attention on the robust baseline under which nearly three-quarters of world trade relies on WTO rules, which also help prevent the dominance of a single actor. In a world of geoeconomic rivalry, where agreements have become harder to reach, the benefits of a level playing field have grown for most states. This remains the WTO's major public good. Adoption of creative approaches to maintain this is thus welcomed.

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