

# Upcoming WTO MC14: What is at stake for Bangladesh?



**MUSTAFIZUR RAHMAN and TANBIN ALAM CHOWDHURY**

By any measure, the upcoming WTO Ministerial Conference (MC14), scheduled for 26 to 29 March 2026 in Yaounde, Cameroon, is expected to be a watershed moment for the multilateral trading system (MTS), which has evolved over the past three decades since the establishment of the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 1995. As the institution tasked with setting rules for global trade, the WTO is now under pressure to respond to growing attacks on the rules-based trading system and to calls for deep reform of the organisation itself. Against this backdrop, MC14 is likely to emerge as a Reform Ministerial.

For Bangladesh, a country scheduled to graduate from the group of least developed countries in November 2026, the stakes are particularly high. MC14 will be the last WTO Ministerial Conference before Bangladesh's graduation from LDC status after more than five decades in the category. Even if Bangladesh succeeds in securing a deferral of graduation by up to three years, decisions taken at MC14 will carry major implications for the country's participation in the multilateral trading system. Both as a graduating LDC and as a future developing country, the outcomes of MC14 will have long-term significance for Bangladesh.

In Geneva, discussions ahead of MC14 are focusing largely on reform of the WTO. These include the consensus-based decision-making process, the single undertaking principle, where nothing is agreed until everything is agreed, the framework for negotiations and decision-making, special and differential treatment for developing countries, including LDCs, and ways to ensure a level playing field for all members. These are high-stakes issues for Bangladesh. The country and its allies in the WTO will need to engage proactively in these debates in order to safeguard the interests of low-income and developing countries at MC14.

## A SHIFTING GLOBAL TRADE LANDSCAPE

In recent years, the growing use of trade measures by major economies to pursue national economic interests has become a defining feature of global commerce. The principles on which the WTO was founded are increasingly under strain. Protectionist policies surged during the Covid-19 pandemic and weakened the authority of the WTO. However, breaches of WTO principles have intensified even further in recent years. Trade is being weaponised in ways rarely seen before.

At the same time, there is a growing view that the WTO will have little future unless significant reforms are undertaken in its decision-making structure, negotiating agenda and institutional objectives. The organisation now faces what many observers describe as an existential crisis.

The use of trade policy to pursue economic and geopolitical objectives is clearly on the rise. This trend increasingly takes the form of unilateral measures, non-tariff barriers, reciprocal tariffs and stringent conditions attached to market access.

Against this backdrop, several critical questions arise. Does the WTO have a viable future? What reforms are required

for the organisation to remain relevant? How can the interests of developing countries be protected within the global trading system? What alliances or power blocs might emerge as global economic power shifts, particularly with the rise of BRICS? And could a new global trade body eventually replace the existing WTO?

## POSSIBLE PATHS AHEAD

Five scenarios may unfold in response to these challenges. The first scenario is that WTO members succeed in reforming and revitalising the organisation through negotiations that address the concerns of different members. Notably, around 80 percent of global merchandise trade still takes place under the Most Favoured Nation principle, one of the core foundations of the WTO system.

A second scenario would involve the dissolution of the WTO and the creation of a newly negotiated global trade organisation. Proponents of this view argue that persistent violations of WTO rules and the increasing resort to unilateral tariffs and security-based trade restrictions have weakened the current system to such an extent that a new

deepen South-South cooperation and develop alternative governance structures led by BRICS countries.

For Bangladesh, a rules-based multilateral trading system that incorporates special and differential treatment for weaker economies, as represented by the WTO, remains the more preferable option. At the same time, it is evident that the WTO is showing clear limitations. While a consensus-based organisation works to Bangladesh's benefit, the slow pace of WTO decision-making has become a growing concern for many countries and deserves careful attention.

## REFORM DEBATES INSIDE THE WTO

Current WTO reform discussions are structured around three interconnected tracks. Track 1 concerns governance. This includes decision-making procedures such as consensus and Article IX, negotiating instruments, existing agreements and negotiations, and the dispute settlement mechanism.

Track 2 focuses on fairness. Issues here include transparency, development and special and differential treatment, market

following LDC graduation, reforms to special and differential treatment so that these remain effective, and a functional dispute settlement mechanism.

While special and differential treatment for LDCs is not being questioned in the proposals, the position of the European Union and the United States is that eligibility for such treatment for developing countries should be determined through objective criteria, should be time-bound, and should include clear pathways for transition to regular WTO disciplines.

At the same time, concerns remain over the lack of meaningful discussion regarding unilateral tariffs, particularly reciprocal tariffs introduced by the United States, which have adversely affected the trade interests of many WTO members. This represents an important fairness issue and highlights a significant inconsistency with the broader principle of fairness. Members of BRICS and other countries are likely to raise these issues at MC14.

## BANGLADESH'S PRIORITIES AT MC14

Bangladesh will need to remain



This photograph shows the World Trade Organization (WTO) headquarters in Geneva. The WTO Ministerial Conference, set for March 26-29 in Cameroon, is expected to be a pivotal moment for the multilateral trading system.

PHOTO: AFP/FILE

multilateral framework with updated rules may be required.

The third plausible scenario is the emergence of a new multilateral trading system with membership limited to countries willing to uphold non-discriminatory rules, while excluding those prone to arbitrary and self-serving measures. Such a system could potentially exclude the country that has shown the strongest inclination to pursue unilateral tariffs and non-MFN arrangements, namely the United States.

The fourth scenario is based on the survival of the WTO, while its negotiating function becomes increasingly organised around open plurilateral agreements and Joint Statement Initiatives. These would focus particularly on new issues such as e-commerce, investment facilitation, services domestic regulation and digital trade. Some countries, including the United States, prefer this option.

A fifth scenario concerns the emergence of a more cohesive coalition of Global South economies that views the crisis facing the WTO and unilateral policies pursued by the United States as both an opportunity and a catalyst to

access including tariffs, reciprocity and non-tariff barriers, subsidies, unfair practices and the broader question of a level playing field.

Track 3 addresses contemporary challenges such as supply chain resilience, economic security, climate change, digital trade and artificial intelligence.

Across recent rounds of discussion, a shared baseline has emerged. Consensus remains the foundation of WTO decision-making and is not itself under challenge. At the same time, there is growing concern that consensus is sometimes used as a de facto veto.

For Bangladesh, the governance track is particularly important. As a relatively weak economy, its interests lie in a consensus-based and genuinely member-driven system that safeguards its trade interests. At the same time, Bangladesh also needs a WTO capable of taking decisions without consensus-based decision-making becoming a permanent stumbling block.

Bangladesh's interest also lies in strengthening the development dimension of trade. Core priorities include support for a smooth transition

attentive to the evolving demands on the multilateral trading system, developments within the WTO and growing calls for deep reform. Preparation will be essential to advance both offensive and defensive interests in this changing environment.

There is hope that ongoing work in Geneva ahead of MC14 may lead to a reformed WTO grounded in predictability, fairness and flexibility. However, how these principles will be defined in practical terms remains uncertain. Reaching an agreement will not be easy.

The United States, on one side, and countries such as India and China on the other, are expected to represent the two ends of the negotiating spectrum, with the European Union likely to occupy a middle ground. Bangladesh will need to participate in these discussions in an informed manner so that its interests as a graduating LDC and as a future developing country are effectively safeguarded and advanced.

*Mustafizur Rahman is distinguished fellow, and Tanbin Alam Chowdhury is programme associate (Research) at the Centre for Policy Dialogue (CPD)*

# Oil rises further above \$100

AFP, Hong Kong

Oil prices jumped further above \$100 Monday and Asian stocks mostly fell as the Iran war moved into a third week with both sides showing no sign of backing down and diplomats trying to ensure safe passage for tankers through the crucial Strait of Hormuz.

Crude shot up in the opening minutes after the US president said at the weekend that forces struck military targets on Kharg Island, a scrubby stretch of land in the Gulf that handles almost all of Iran's oil exports.

He also warned attacks could expand to energy infrastructure if the Islamic republic interferes with transit through Hormuz, which has been effectively closed since the US-Israel operations began on February 28.

Iran's Fars news agency reported soon after that no oil infrastructure was damaged in strikes.

Trump urged other countries to send warships to keep the waterway open but offered no specifics or commitments from the US side, saying he hoped China, France, Japan, South Korea and the UK would take part.

He later wrote Saturday in a Truth Social post: "The Countries of the World that receive Oil through the Hormuz Strait must take care of that passage, and we will help - A LOT!"

"This should have always been a team effort, and now it will be."

# War-related oil squeeze a 'short-term pain' US official insists

AFP, Washington

President Donald Trump's top energy official said Sunday that Americans will have to endure the "short-term pain" of higher prices at the pump as US forces conduct their war against Iran.

Now in the third week of a multi-dimensional Middle East conflict that has seen US and Israeli forces pound Iran's military targets, and Tehran responding with missile and drone attacks against several neighboring states, global energy prices have soared.

And concern has swelled that a lengthy blockage by Iran of the critical Strait of Hormuz could send crude prices through the roof.

"President Trump needed to act now... to stop the killing of American soldiers, to stop the destabilization of the region, and to end Iran's ability to threaten energy markets," US Energy Secretary Chris Wright told ABC News talk show "This Week."

# Dollar pulls back

REUTERS, London

The dollar pulled back from 10-month peaks on Monday in a tentative start to a week that brings a slew of central bank meetings held under the shadow of the US-Israel war on Iran.

The US Federal Reserve, the European Central Bank, the Bank of England and the Bank of Japan are among those to hold their first policy meetings since the Middle East conflict began, offering investors a sense of how rate setters view the impact of soaring oil prices on inflation and growth.

As the European session got underway, the dollar index was a touch lower at 100.27 and holding below a 10-month high hit on Friday.

The dollar has benefited from a flight to safety since the US-Israeli strikes on Iran began at the end of February. Other major currencies such as the euro have been hurt by their economies' dependence on oil imports.

Since the start of the conflict, investors have almost eliminated their bearish bets against the dollar, according to weekly data from the US markets regulator.

# Asean states working on fuel-sharing deal

ANN/PHILIPPINE DAILY INQUIRER

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean), which the Philippines currently chairs, will expedite the enforcement of an energy-sharing mechanism which will allow member states to support each other's oil and gas needs during supply disruptions.

This measure, through which Asean countries can provide petroleum supplies to neighbors facing shortages of at least 10 percent of their requirement, comes as the conflict in the Middle East continues to escalate further.

In a press briefing following the 32nd Asean Economic Ministers' (AEM) Retreat in Taguig City on Friday, Trade Undersecretary Allan Gepty said the AEMs agreed to hasten the completion of the Asean Petroleum Security Agreement (Apsa) ahead of this year's summit in May.

Under Apsa, a member could give a distress notice to the secretariat of the Asean Council on Petroleum of the occurrence of a "critical shortage" in its petroleum supply due to an emergency.

Critical shortage happens when a country experiences a shortfall of at least 10 percent of its normal domestic requirement for a continuous period of at least 30 days.

Before requesting assistance from other Asean states, the distressed country shall implement short-term measures to reduce demand of its petroleum use, including demand restraint, fuel switching, price surge protection and information sharing.

Under Apsa's Coordinated Emergency

Response Measures, all member states shall endeavor to supply petroleum to the distressed country at the aggregate amount equal to 10 percent of its normal domestic requirement.

The terms and conditions of the sale of petroleum shall be negotiated among the parties "in the spirit of assistance and no undue advantage shall be taken by the Asean states."

President Marcos earlier assured the public that the country has sufficient oil stockpiles to cover approximately 50 to 60 days of supply.

Specifically, the country's available reserves cover diesel, which is sufficient for about 50.5 days; fuel oil and gasoline, each sufficient for about 51.5 days; kerosene, sufficient for about 67.5 days; jet fuel, sufficient for about 58 days; and liquefied petroleum gas, sufficient for around 29 days.

Sharing under Apsa, however, is done on a voluntary and commercial basis because these countries' exports are often tied up in long-term commercial contracts. This means a distressed country such as the Philippines must still pay market rates which are currently spiked by the ongoing war.

Based on the Department of Energy-Oil Industry Management Bureau, petroleum product demand among the country's different industries reached 184.5 million barrels in 2024. Asean is highly vulnerable to Middle East tensions as most of its crude oil and a significant share of its liquefied natural gas are imported from that region.

Governments and businesses across

Southeast Asia are scrambling to stave off energy shortages as the Strait of Hormuz remains shut to maritime traffic amid the Iran War.

While Asean governments have directly intervened by enforcing price caps to stabilize fuel prices, such was not the case for the Philippines whose oil industry remains deregulated in accordance with a 1998 law.

Local oil companies set their own prices

based on global crude oil prices, foreign exchange rate, and shipping and refining costs.

Congress is rushing to pass a law giving the President emergency powers to suspend the excise on fuel products as crude prices continue to rise.

The move is projected to reduce the price of gasoline by P10 per liter, while the price of diesel could be reduced by P6 per liter.



People queue to buy fuel at a petrol station in Hanoi after Vietnam's trade ministry called on local businesses to encourage their employees to work from home to save fuel amid disruptions in supply and price surges triggered by the US-Israel war on Iran. The photo was taken recently.

PHOTO: REUTERS