

What the US Really Wants from MC14 in Yaoundé

The WTO reform agenda is a distraction. The real prize is dismantling MFN through plurilateral precedents.

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As trade ministers gather in Yaoundé, Cameroon, for the WTO's 14th Ministerial Conference (MC14) on 26–29 March 2026, the preparatory process has produced a dense fog of competing reform proposals, draft ministerial statements, and work plans.

The facilitator-led consultations at the WTO headquarters in Geneva focused for the past few weeks on decision-making, development and Special and Differential Treatment (S&DT), as well as level-playing-field issues, while the United States, European Union and others tabled their own reform submissions. The sheer volume and scope of this activity have muddied the picture of what exactly requires ministerial attention and decision.

This confusion, however, serves a purpose. It obscures the fact that the U.S. — which has done more than any other member to destabilise the multilateral trading system through unilateral tariffs, bilateral Agreements on Reciprocal Trade (ARTs), and paralysing the WTO Appellate Body — is not primarily interested in the reform or continued relevance of the WTO. Its 2026 Trade Policy Agenda, released earlier this

month, makes this plain: the US will push to reorient the WTO's negotiating function by "favouring meaningful plurilateral agreements" and "urging reassessment of the Most Favoured Nation (MFN) principle" so that trading nations can differentiate among partners in their liberalisation commitments.

The MFN rule is the foundational principle of the WTO that requires any trade advantage granted to one WTO member to be extended equally to all. The U.S. WTO reform paper submitted to the General Council in December 2025 (WT/GC/W/984) goes further, arguing that MFN "is not just unsuitable for this era" but actively prevents countries from optimising their trade relationships.

Outside the WTO, the U.S. is pursuing its trade interests through bilateral ARTs with Bangladesh, Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia and others. Since its Supreme Court struck down the legal basis for these ARTs, section 301 of the U.S. 1974 Trade Act has been activated. But within the WTO, the U.S. priority at MC14 is more focused and consequential than the reform agenda suggests.

The immediate objective is to secure adoption of the plurilateral Investment Facilitation Agreement (IFA) into the WTO's legal architecture under Annex 4 of the Marrakesh Agreement — despite the U.S. not having participated in the IFA negotiations and having no interest in being a party to it. U.S. Ambassador Joseph Barloon identified the IFA as one of a limited number of issues the U.S. wants decided at MC14.

Why would the US push through an agreement it will not sign? Because the IFA is not the end but the means. Its incorporation into the WTO — while its initiation, negotiation and addition have been formally contested — would establish that plurilateral agreements can be adopted and added to the WTO rulebook without the consent of all members. Once that door is opened, the principle of consensus in WTO agenda-setting and rule-making is effectively undermined.

This is precisely what the U.S. wants. Its December 2025 reform submission argues that plurilateral agreements should allow "likeminded trading partners committed to fair and reciprocal trade" to strengthen ties "within the architecture of the WTO agreements," with benefits limited to consenting parties — that is, on a non-MFN basis. The paper warns that without a path for plurilaterals, the WTO is "not a viable forum for negotiating." Read together with the Trade Policy Agenda's call to reassess MFN, the logic is clear: plurilaterals are the vehicle through which the U.S. intends to displace

MFN as the organising principle of the multilateral trading system. Members that cannot or choose not to join will simply be left out.

The second U.S. priority reinforces this trajectory. Washington is pressing developing countries to make permanent the moratorium on customs duties on electronic commerce transmissions. First adopted as a temporary measure in 1998, the moratorium was last renewed at MC13 in Abu Dhabi, where members agreed it would expire at MC14 or 31 March 2026. The U.S. now wants to lock it in permanently and expand the scope of digital goods and services beyond customs authorities.

The stakes are high and direct. UNCTAD has estimated that the moratorium costs developing countries up to \$10 billion annually in foregone tariff revenue, with 95 per cent of the losses borne by developing countries. For many, customs duties constitute 10–30 per cent of total tax revenue — for some, over 50 per cent. The primary beneficiaries are the large technology firms in developed countries that dominate cross-border digital trade. Making the moratorium permanent would formalise this revenue transfer and strip developing countries of policy space to regulate digital imports as the digital economy grows.

Both these issues — the IFA and the e-commerce moratorium — involve developing countries giving up something concrete (MFN treatment, consensus-based decision-making, effective say over agenda setting, customs revenue and regulatory autonomy) in exchange for nothing. The U.S. is not offering concessions on agriculture, S&DT, or the longstanding mandated issues that matter to developing country Members. It is not proposing to fix the dispute settlement system it broke. It is leveraging reform to extract structural concessions that tilt the WTO's institutional machinery in its favour, while pursuing its trade interests bilaterally.

Once plurilaterals are entrenched and the moratorium made permanent, the U.S. will have a freer hand to set the WTO agenda without negotiating with developing country and Least Developed Country members. S&DT, already under pressure from demands to end self-designation and narrow its application, will recede further as a meaningful principle and integral part of the negotiations.

The reform agenda, for all its complexity, is secondary to the structural question: will the WTO remain a consensus-based institution where MFN and consensus decision-making ensure the smallest member has a say? Or will it be refashioned into a platform

for variable-geometry agreements where the powerful set the terms and the rest face compliance or exclusion?

Developing countries have fought for decades to preserve a multilateral trading system in which trade could serve as a tool for their development. That system is now under direct threat — not from its irrelevance, but from a deliberate strategy to hollow it out from within.

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