

WORLD TRADE ORGANIZATION

Weaponisation of International Trade

Tariff Barriers • Export Controls • Protectionist Measures

AGENDA

Deliberation upon the Weaponisation of International Trade through Tariff Barriers, Export Controls, and Protectionist Measures

A delegate-first guide: understand the issue, learn the WTO rules, map state interests, and enter committee ready to negotiate.

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1. Introduction to the Committee

The World Trade Organization (WTO) is the international organisation responsible for administering the multilateral rules governing trade among its members. Created by the Marrakesh Agreement in 1995, it brought together the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) and a wider set of agreements covering goods, services, intellectual property, dispute settlement and other areas of trade policy.

At its core, the WTO attempts to make international trade more predictable. Members negotiate commitments, notify measures, participate in committees, monitor one another's policies and may challenge measures through dispute settlement. However, WTO membership does not

mean that governments lose the ability to regulate. Members retain policy space for objectives such as public health, environmental protection, economic development and national security, subject to the rules and exceptions of the agreements. For this agenda, the most important distinction is between a trade measure that is simply restrictive and a measure that is inconsistent with WTO obligations. A tariff can be restrictive without necessarily breaching a bound tariff commitment; an export restriction may raise questions under Article XI but may also engage an exception; a subsidy may be permitted in one form and challengeable in another.

WHAT THIS COMMITTEE IS REALLY DEBATING

The issue is not 'free trade versus protectionism'. Delegates must determine how the WTO can preserve legitimate economic and security policy space while preventing tariffs, export controls, subsidies and other measures from becoming tools of coercion, discrimination or uncontrolled protectionism.

2. Weaponisation of International Trade through Tariff Barriers, Export Controls, and Protectionist Measures

Statement of the Problem

International trade is increasingly being treated not only as an economic activity but also as a source of strategic leverage. Governments can raise tariffs to protect domestic industries, restrict exports of strategically important goods or technologies, subsidise national producers, or use regulatory and procurement measures to influence where production takes place.

This becomes especially significant when the product involved is strategically important. Semiconductors, energy inputs, critical minerals, food, pharmaceuticals and advanced industrial technologies can sit at the centre of global supply chains. A restriction at one point can therefore affect producers and consumers in many other countries.

The problem is complicated by the fact that the same policy instrument may have a legitimate purpose. A government may restrict exports to protect national security or conserve scarce resources; support domestic production to improve resilience; or impose a trade remedy after finding injury from dumped or subsidised imports. The WTO question is therefore one of rules, evidence, design, transparency and proportionality—not simply whether trade was restricted.

THREE WORDS TO KEEP SEPARATE

Tariff = a charge on imports. Export control = a restriction or licensing requirement affecting goods leaving a country. Protectionism = the broader policy objective of

shielding domestic economic activity from foreign competition. These can overlap, but they are not interchangeable terms.

History of the Problem

The modern multilateral trading system developed partly in response to the protectionist experience of the interwar period. The GATT entered into force in 1948 and established disciplines on tariffs, non-discrimination and quantitative restrictions. Successive negotiating rounds lowered tariffs and expanded the rules.

The Uruguay Round (1986–1994) created the WTO in 1995. The new system expanded disciplines to subsidies, anti-dumping, safeguards, technical regulations, sanitary and phytosanitary measures, services and intellectual property, while also creating the WTO dispute settlement system.

Trade conflicts did not disappear. Members continued to use trade remedies and challenge subsidies, market-access restrictions and regulatory measures. From the late 2000s onward, financial instability, supply-chain shocks and geopolitical tensions made resilience and economic security increasingly prominent in trade policy.

The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the vulnerability of international supply chains and the use of export restrictions for essential goods. The war in Ukraine and subsequent geopolitical tensions further increased attention to strategic trade measures. WTO-IMF monitoring now shows that global trade-policy activity accelerated strongly from 2020 and reached a new high in early 2026, with restrictive measures driving much of the recent increase.

Current Situation

Tariff barriers and tariff escalation

A tariff is a customs duty imposed on an imported product. Tariffs can protect domestic producers by making imported products more expensive, while also generating government revenue and affecting consumer prices.

TERM		
TERM	WHAT IT MEANS	WHY IT MATTERS
Bound tariff	Maximum tariff level a member has committed to in its WTO schedule.	Exceeding a bound rate can raise a WTO compliance issue.
Applied tariff	The tariff actually charged at the border.	Can be lower than the bound rate.

MFN tariff	The normal non-preferential tariff applied under most-favoured-nation treatment.	Important baseline for comparing market access.
Tariff escalation	Higher tariffs on more processed products than on raw materials or inputs.	Can affect developing countries' ability to move up value chains.

The 2026 World Tariff Profiles provide current information on bound and applied tariffs, tariff averages, duty-free lines and trade-remedy activity across more than 170 economies and customs territories. The WTO Tariff & Trade Data platform also allows delegates to examine tariff-line information, bilateral tariff relations and changes in applied duties.

WTO source: [World Tariff Profiles 2026](#)

WTO source: [WTO Tariff & Trade Data](#)

DELEGATE SHORTCUT

When a country says 'our tariff is legal', ask: Is the tariff within the country's bound rate? Is MFN treatment being respected? Is there a preferential agreement? Is the measure actually a tariff, or is it a quota/licensing/regulatory restriction instead?

Export controls, licensing and quantitative restrictions

Export controls regulate goods leaving a country. They can include export bans, quotas, licensing requirements, authorisation systems and other restrictions. Governments may use them for food security, conservation, public health, foreign-policy or national-security objectives.

GATT Article XI:1 generally prohibits prohibitions or restrictions other than duties, taxes or other charges on imports or exports, including restrictions made effective through quotas or licences. Article XI:2 contains specific exceptions, including temporary export restrictions used to prevent or relieve critical shortages of foodstuffs or other essential products.

Export licensing has become particularly important because licensing can be used either as a routine administrative mechanism or as a strategic gatekeeping tool. WTO research notes the surge in export-restricting measures and licensing during the COVID-19 pandemic and the conflict in Ukraine.

WTO source: [GATT Article XI — legal text](#)

WTO source: [WTO — Export licensing in the WTO context](#)

Subsidies and industrial policy

A subsidy is government financial support that can lower the cost of production or improve the position of a firm or industry. Subsidies can be used for research, green transition, infrastructure, regional development, strategic industries or economic recovery.

The SCM Agreement is central to the debate. It distinguishes between prohibited subsidies and other subsidies that may be challenged when they cause adverse effects. Members may also

impose countervailing duties under defined procedures when subsidised imports injure a domestic industry.

QUESTION	WHAT TO CHECK
What is the measure?	Grant, loan, tax benefit, equity contribution, government purchase, etc.
Is it a subsidy under WTO rules?	Identify the financial contribution and benefit.
Is it specific?	Check whether the benefit is limited to certain enterprises, industries or regions.
What are the effects?	Look for injury, serious prejudice, displacement or other adverse effects.
What remedy is available?	Dispute settlement or countervailing action where the agreement permits.

WTO source: [WTO — Subsidies and Countervailing Measures](#)

Trade remedies: anti-dumping, countervailing duties and safeguards

Trade remedies are important because they are often described politically as 'protectionism', but WTO law expressly provides mechanisms for addressing certain forms of import-related injury.

INSTRUMENT	BASIC IDEA	KEY CONDITION
Anti-dumping	Responds to dumped imports.	Dumping + material injury + causal link, following an investigation.
Countervailing duty	Responds to subsidised imports.	Subsidy + injury + causal link, following an investigation.
Safeguard	Temporary emergency protection from increased imports.	Increased imports causing or threatening serious injury.

Safeguards are particularly different from anti-dumping and countervailing measures because they are not based on an allegation of unfair trade. They are emergency measures responding to increased imports and are generally applied irrespective of source.

WTO source: [WTO — Anti-Dumping](#)

WTO source: [WTO — Safeguards](#)

National security and Article XXI

GATT Article XXI contains security exceptions. It covers information that a member considers contrary to its essential security interests, measures concerning specified military and nuclear matters, measures taken in time of war or other emergency in international relations, and measures taken pursuant to UN Charter obligations concerning international peace and security.

The difficult policy issue is how to prevent the security exception from becoming an unlimited route around ordinary trade obligations. WTO dispute settlement has considered the interpretation and reviewability of Article XXI, making this an area where legal text and geopolitical reality directly intersect.

THE DEBATE TO PREPARE FOR

One side: national security cannot be reduced to commercial efficiency. The other: if every restrictive trade measure can be labelled 'security', the predictability of the WTO system is weakened. A strong resolution has to leave room for genuine security concerns while improving transparency and preventing abuse.

WTO source: [WTO — GATT Article XXI Analytical Index](#)

Technical regulations and non-tariff barriers

Protectionism can exist without a tariff. Technical regulations, product standards, conformity assessment, licensing requirements and health or safety measures can all influence market access.

The TBT Agreement recognises legitimate objectives such as health, safety, environmental protection and prevention of deceptive practices, while seeking to ensure that technical regulations and standards do not create unnecessary obstacles to trade. The SPS Agreement similarly governs food safety and animal and plant health measures.

MEASURE	LEGITIMATE PURPOSE	RISK OF PROTECTIONISM
Product standard	Safety / quality	Different rules used mainly to exclude foreign products.
SPS requirement	Food, animal or plant health	Requirements not supported by science or applied discriminatorily.
Conformity assessment	Verify compliance	Costly or opaque testing procedures that disadvantage foreign suppliers.
Licensing	Administrative control	Discretionary delays or opaque approval systems.

WTO source: [WTO — Technical Barriers to Trade](#)

WTO source: [WTO — Sanitary and Phytosanitary Measures](#)

Supply-chain resilience and strategic dependence

Supply-chain resilience means the ability to maintain access to critical goods despite shocks. Governments may pursue resilience by diversifying suppliers, maintaining strategic stocks, investing in domestic capacity or building regional partnerships.

The challenge is that resilience can look similar to protectionism. A local-content requirement or subsidy may be justified as reducing strategic dependence while simultaneously disadvantaging imported goods. Delegates should therefore ask whether the same resilience objective can be achieved through less trade-distorting measures.

Developing countries and policy space

Trade restrictions by major economies can create spillover effects for smaller economies through higher prices, diverted trade and supply shortages. At the same time, developing economies may rely more heavily on tariffs for revenue and may seek policy space to build domestic industries.

Delegates should therefore consider special and differential treatment, technical assistance, transparency and the fiscal realities of developing countries rather than treating every member as if it had the same capacity to absorb trade shocks.

Transparency and the rise in trade-policy activity

The WTO Trade Monitoring Exercise collects factual information on trade measures and helps members understand how policies are evolving. The WTO-IMF Trade Policy Activity Index, updated through May 2026, shows that global trade-policy activity reached a new high in early 2026; restrictive measures such as tariff increases, import bans and quantitative restrictions were the main drivers of the recent increase.

WHY THIS MATTERS FOR COMMITTEE

The issue is no longer hypothetical. Delegates are negotiating in an environment where trade-policy activity is unusually high. Your resolution should therefore focus on mechanisms that can work during periods of geopolitical tension—not only in normal trading conditions.

WTO source: [WTO — Trade Monitoring](#)

WTO source: [WTO-IMF Trade Policy Activity Index, July 2026](#)

Relevant WTO Actions

The WTO has not adopted one single treaty called an 'anti-weaponisation framework'. Instead, the existing rulebook contains several separate disciplines that become relevant depending on the measure used. Delegates should understand what each instrument can—and cannot—do.

GATT 1994 — Tariffs and non-discrimination

GATT disciplines tariff commitments and establishes core principles including MFN treatment and national treatment. Members' goods schedules record bound tariff commitments.

GATT Article XI — Quantitative restrictions

Generally disciplines import and export prohibitions and restrictions other than duties, with specified exceptions.

GATT Article XXI — Security exceptions

Provides specific security exceptions. Its interpretation is particularly important when trade measures are justified by national-security concerns.

SCM Agreement

Disciplines subsidies and regulates countervailing measures.

Anti-Dumping Agreement

Sets procedures and substantive rules for anti-dumping investigations and measures.

Safeguards Agreement

Provides a framework for temporary emergency measures against increased imports causing or threatening serious injury.

TBT Agreement

Addresses technical regulations, standards and conformity assessment while preserving legitimate regulatory objectives.

SPS Agreement

Provides disciplines for food safety and animal/plant health measures.

Trade Monitoring

Improves transparency by tracking trade measures and policy developments.

Dispute Settlement

Provides the WTO mechanism through which members can challenge measures they consider inconsistent with WTO obligations.

WTO Rulebook at a Glance

IF THE STATE USES...	START WITH...	ASK...
Tariff increase	GATT Article II + schedule	What is the bound rate? What is actually applied?
Import/export ban or quota	GATT Article XI	Is it a quantitative restriction? Does an exception apply?

National-security restriction	GATT Article XXI	What security circumstance is being invoked?
Domestic subsidy	SCM Agreement	Is it specific? Prohibited? Does it cause adverse effects?
Dumping claim	Anti-Dumping Agreement	Has dumping and injury been established through an investigation?
Emergency import restriction	Safeguards Agreement	Are increased imports causing serious injury?
Technical regulation	TBT Agreement	Is the regulation legitimate, non-discriminatory and not unnecessarily trade restrictive?
Food/animal/plant measure	SPS Agreement	Is the measure science/risk based and consistently applied?

Bloc Positions

The bloc positions outlined below are general suggestions. A country may fit more than one bloc, and delegates should research the assigned state's tariff profile, export structure, strategic imports, industrial policy, trade agreements and recent WTO disputes before choosing a position.

Major Industrialised Economies

Likely to emphasise national security, supply-chain resilience, technological leadership and the ability to respond to unfair trade practices. They may defend targeted industrial support or export controls while simultaneously seeking stronger disciplines against coercive measures by other states.

Major Emerging Economies

Likely to stress sovereignty, development and policy space. They may oppose unilateral restrictions that affect access to technology or markets and argue that subsidy disciplines must account for differences in development and fiscal capacity.

Developing and Least-Developed Countries

Likely to prioritise predictable market access, affordable imports, technical assistance and protection from the spillover effects of trade wars between major economies. They may favour stronger notification and consultation mechanisms.

Resource-Exporting Economies

May emphasise sovereign control over natural resources and the ability to manage exports for conservation, domestic supply or strategic reasons. Import-dependent partners may instead demand greater predictability.

Import-Dependent Economies

Likely to oppose sudden export bans or restrictions on food, energy, medicines and critical industrial inputs. They may support transparency, diversification and emergency consultation mechanisms.

Small and Vulnerable Economies

May favour strong multilateral rules because large economies possess greater bargaining power. They are likely to seek predictable access, capacity-building and safeguards against discriminatory unilateral measures.

Questions a Resolution Must Answer

A good WTO resolution should not merely condemn protectionism. It should answer the following practical questions:

1. How should the WTO distinguish legitimate national-security measures from protectionist measures presented as security policy?
2. Should members strengthen notification requirements for export restrictions, licensing systems and strategic subsidies?
3. How can the WTO improve transparency around rapidly changing tariff measures?
4. How can developing countries preserve industrial policy space without triggering subsidy races or discriminatory localisation requirements?
5. Should members create emergency consultation mechanisms when export restrictions threaten critical food, medicine, energy or industrial supplies?
6. How can trade remedies remain evidence-based and time-bound while preserving members' right to respond to injury from imports?
7. How should the WTO address measures that combine tariffs with investment restrictions, procurement preferences or technology controls?
8. How can technical standards and health regulations remain legitimate without becoming disguised restrictions on foreign goods?
9. What role should WTO committees and Trade Policy Reviews play before a dispute escalates?
10. How can dispute settlement remain credible when a member invokes national security?
11. What incentives could encourage diversification of supply chains without forcing inefficient or discriminatory domestic production?
12. How should special and differential treatment be incorporated into any new transparency or notification framework?

Suggestions for Further Reading

Do not try to read the entire WTO rulebook before committee. Read strategically:

PRIORITY	READ THIS	WHAT YOU SHOULD GET FROM IT
1	GATT Articles II and XI	Tariff bindings and quantitative restrictions.
2	GATT Article XXI	National-security exception and its limits.
3	SCM Agreement	Subsidies and countervailing measures.
4	Anti-Dumping + Safeguards	Trade remedies and their different legal triggers.
5	TBT + SPS	Non-tariff barriers and legitimate regulation.
6	World Tariff Profiles 2026	Your country's tariff profile and comparison with partners.
7	WTO Trade Monitoring	Recent restrictive and facilitating measures.
8	WTO-IMF TPA Index 2026	The broader global trend behind the agenda.

Before Committee: Country Research Checklist

- **Tariffs:** Know your country's major applied tariffs, bound rates and important tariff-sensitive sectors.
- **Trade dependence:** Identify the country's three largest trading partners and strategic imports/exports.
- **Export controls:** Check whether the country uses or faces export restrictions in critical sectors.
- **Industrial policy:** Identify major domestic subsidies or strategic-industry programmes.
- **Trade remedies:** Find recent anti-dumping, countervailing or safeguard cases involving your country.
- **Security:** Know the country's position on the use of national-security exceptions in trade.
- **Negotiating red lines:** Write three things your country will support, three things it will oppose and three things it could compromise on.

- **Resolution ideas:** Bring at least two concrete, WTO-compatible mechanisms—not just broad calls for 'cooperation'.

3. Bibliography

Official WTO materials used for this guide. Hyperlinks are embedded for direct use in Google Docs.

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