

**Shaping the Future of Global Trade in an Era of Shifting U.S.
Engagement, Emerging Powers, and Digital Innovation**

PUBLIC EVENT

Tokyo, Japan

December 4, 2025

Topic: Future of the World Trade Organisation (WTO)

Good afternoon.

Let me begin by thanking KAS Japan for organising this public event, and for inviting me to share my thoughts on a topic close to my heart – the Future of the World Trade Organization (WTO).

As many of you will be aware, there has long been a conversation about the necessity of WTO reform and reinvigoration of the multilateral trading system, which is under strain.

This conversation has gained much significance today, against the backdrop of rising unilateralism and protectionism in global trade.

It is important to first set the context.

There is so much written today about the WTO's decline, that many fail to appreciate the crucial role it still plays in all our daily lives.

The WTO is a global public good and the bulwark of the rules-based multilateral trading system. Around 80% of global merchandise trade still occurs on non-discriminatory, Most-Favoured Nation terms agreed at the WTO.

The predictability and stability provided by the WTO system has raised world trade volumes by over 45 times the levels of trade in the 1950s.

This has led to economic growth and job creation, benefiting both producers and consumers around the world, particularly in developing and least developed countries.

The 166-Member WTO remains the only forum for countries across varying levels of economic development to have open discussions on trade policy.

Day-to-day work continues to be undertaken in various WTO Committees that deal with the nuts and bolts of international trade.

At the same time, it is true that perpetual stalemate in trade negotiations, and a partially functioning dispute settlement system has eroded the credibility of the WTO in the public eye.

The WTO's rules represent a bygone era, which is not aligned with present day realities.

There is also growing divergence among WTO Members on the foundational premises of the organisation, worsened by an onslaught of unilateralism and growing mistrust between trading partners.

All of this means that in the popular imagination, the WTO is today dysfunctional.

There is almost universal recognition that the WTO is in crisis, and that advancing a WTO reform agenda is increasingly challenging.

Any frank assessment would determine that expecting any radical overhaul in the present circumstances would be a vain hope.

So then, what can be done under these circumstances?

In my view, the first task needs to be to cultivate a positive narrative around the enduring centrality of the WTO in the global trade architecture.

Unless there is a conducive environment, there will be no political interest in undertaking meaningful WTO reform.

To create a supportive environment, we need to demystify and democratise discussions related to international trade and the WTO.

The message needs to go out that international trade affects all of us.

A combination of bottom-up and top-down conversations on the urgency of reinvigorating the multilateral trading system will lead to greater acceptability of the WTO as a global public good.

It will also enhance understanding of WTO's relevance among people around the world, by showcasing the benefits that have accrued in terms of poverty alleviation, employment generation and expansion of consumer choices over the past thirty years.

Providing clear and easily accessible information on the WTO's benefits, its current state and reform efforts is essential for building public understanding and support for it.

This needs to be the first step.

Next, WTO members may need to relook their long-held positions.

Major WTO players and middle powers need to join forces to pursue a single-issue agenda. Countries need to form a coalition of the willing for preserving systemic interests and advancing WTO reform. Major developing countries need to rise to the occasion.

On substantive aspects, the efforts already underway need to be consolidated.

The increasing support to the Multi-Party Interim Appeal Arbitration Arrangement (MPIA) as an alternative to the appellate stage of the dispute settlement system is one example.

Along with the emergence of open plurilateral-type variable geometry arrangements, these developments indicate the desire of WTO members to continue to engage on trade rules and discussions within the larger WTO umbrella.

In all these aspects, external supporters and Friends of the WTO system also need to step up to shape a positive narrative around the WTO and the importance of its continuity and reform.

Evidence-based knowledge outputs reiterating the importance of the WTO and outlining its strengths and weaknesses, along with the possible contours of reform, need to be supplied from the outside to complement the discussions inside.

All these activities need to gather pace in both Geneva and important Capitals around the world in the run-up to the 14th WTO Ministerial Conference, scheduled to be held in Cameroon in late-March next year.

In this respect, events like today's public outreach are crucial.

Let me share here that CUTS International, the organisation I head, has taken this up in mission mode.

We organised a Roundtable Discussion on the imperative of WTO reform on the sidelines of the WTO Public Forum at Geneva in September, with several WTO members and eminent participants such as Pascal Lamy, former WTO Director General, in attendance.

Overall, I have seen first-hand the benefits of a freer, fairer, rules-based multilateral trade regime with the WTO at its centre for decades.

I have also seen the perils of protectionism and unilateralism.

My fervent plea to this gathering is this: Please don't write off the multilateral trading system with the WTO at its core.

We are at a critical juncture in the history of international trade policy. We need to be optimistic, not despondent.

Based on what I have outlined in my remarks, I am pleased to share that we are launching a new initiative on taking WTO reform related outreach around the world.

I invite you all to lend your active support.

We must stand together to preserve the WTO.

Let us together shape the WTO of the future, and the future of the WTO.

Thank you very much.