

Defending the multilateral trading system: Survey findings on WTO reform

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The multilateral system of globally agreed trade rules is under its gravest threat since its inception in 1948. To support the WTO's effort to reform itself, the Hinrich Foundation conducted a survey to help evaluate and pinpoint critical needs in the WTO's reform process. The Foundation's goal is to help defend the global multilateral trading system.

Introduction

On 19 February, 2025, World Trade Organization Director-General Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala proposed an initiative to convene an independent panel of "eminent persons" to kickstart a reform process of the WTO.

She brought this idea to a meeting of the WTO's General Council that day, its ruling body of 166 member countries. The General Council, the highest decision-making body at an institution established to defend the global multilateral trading system, took no decision on the proposal.

The initiative remains in limbo.

Whether through an independent panel or otherwise, reforming the WTO is no longer a matter of choice.

The multilateral system of globally agreed trade rules is, if not already decimated, under its gravest threat since its postwar inception in 1948 under the US-led General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade. The WTO, set up in 1995 and armed with wider powers as GATT's replacement, has no choice but to reexamine its objectives and restructure itself if it is to survive today's trade challenges.

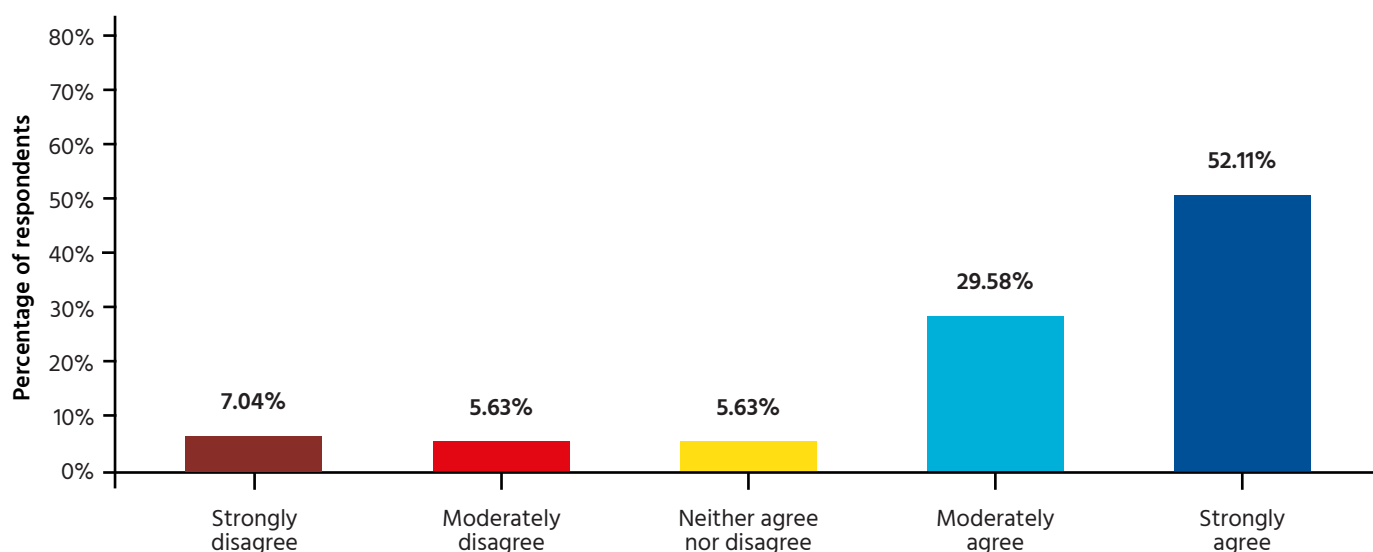
To support this transformative effort ahead of the 14th Ministerial Conference in March 2026 in Cameroon, the Hinrich Foundation conducted a survey to help evaluate and pinpoint critical needs in the organization and its reform process. The survey was conducted in the three weeks up to 16 April, 2025. It was sent to 27,665 respondents, evenly segmented into policymakers, trade practitioners, academia, and media covering five major trading regions: North America, Europe, the Asia-Pacific, South America, and Africa and the Middle East.

The Foundation's goal is to help defend the global multilateral trading system, as the WTO seeks assistance from supporters in the 30th year since its founding. The survey asked nine questions on the most critical elements of where the WTO should focus its reform process. Prior to launching the survey, the Hinrich Foundation consulted six global trade policy experts with experience in WTO processes and initiatives on the topics and framing of the survey questions.

The survey's findings show an overwhelming proportion of respondents agreeing with the need for the urgent reform of the WTO and its governance.

WTO's need for reform

Eighty-two percent of respondents agreed that the WTO needs reform. Across the five optional responses, 52% of respondents expressed strong agreement while 30% expressed moderate agreement. The rest, 19%, disagreed or were undecided.¹

Question 2 – Do you agree or disagree that the World Trade Organization needs reform?

Note: The Hinrich Foundation sent the survey to 27,665 respondents, evenly segmented into policymakers, trade practitioners, academia, and media covering North America, Europe, the Asia-Pacific, South America, and Africa and the Middle East.

Consensus as a decision-making system

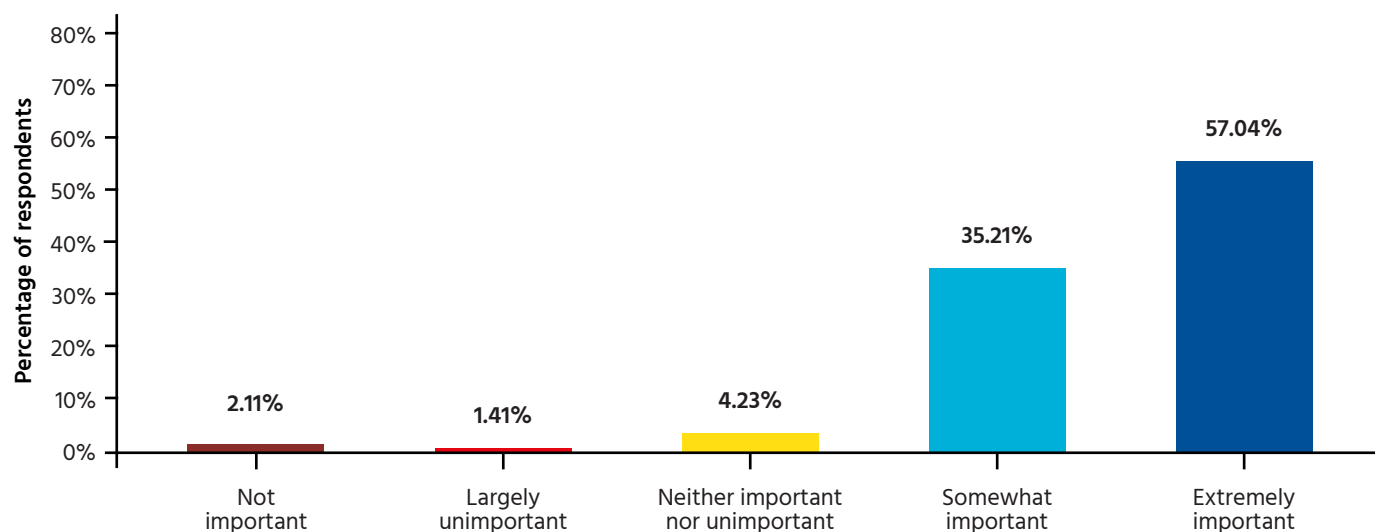
We asked respondents how important they felt it was to reform the WTO's practice of requiring full consensus among its 166 members in making trade rules. Article 9 of the WTO's founding Marrakesh Agreement enshrines the practice of using consensus "followed under GATT" as a basis for WTO decisions.

More than 92% of our survey's respondents agreed it was important to modernize the practice of consensus, with 57% saying it was extremely important. A combined 3.5% said it was unimportant while 4.2% were undecided.

It should be noted that GATT, which was signed by 23 countries in 1947, never explicitly mentions the word "consensus." The interpretation of its rule-making methods brought up consensus as one among a menu of voting systems that could be used. Consensus merely became a practice there due to the far smaller number of members and their higher degree of like-minded collaboration at the time.

Nearly 80 years later, multilateral decision-making has changed. With 166 members at widely different levels of economic development, most of the survey respondents agree that consensus at the WTO now has become a recipe for gridlock and hinders progress on trade rule-making.

Question 4 – The WTO’s consensus-based decision-making process suffers from gridlock and hinders progress on key trade issues. How important is it to modernize the consensus-based decision-making process?



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Adapting to new trade realities

The WTO was set up to provide a more permanent institutional structure with a stronger legal basis than GATT. It was envisaged as a combination of parliament and court in a single global body for trade rules and disputes.

We asked respondents a broad question in the survey to gauge the urgency for the WTO to adapt its institutional structure to new realities in global trade. Some 70% said it was extremely pressing for the WTO to do so. Another 23% said it was moderately pressing, while 5% said it was not pressing.

GATT successfully concluded eight rounds of tariff negotiations, the last one in 1994 before the WTO took its place. Since it was founded in 1995, the WTO has failed to successfully conclude a single round.

Legal recognition for plurilateral agreements

A key question is how the WTO can make and legally adopt new trade rules more efficiently than it does now. Asked whether the WTO must adopt flexible approaches to legalize trade rules reached by “plurilateral” subsets of its members, 85% of respondents said they agreed, comprising 45% who strongly agreed and 39% who moderately agreed.

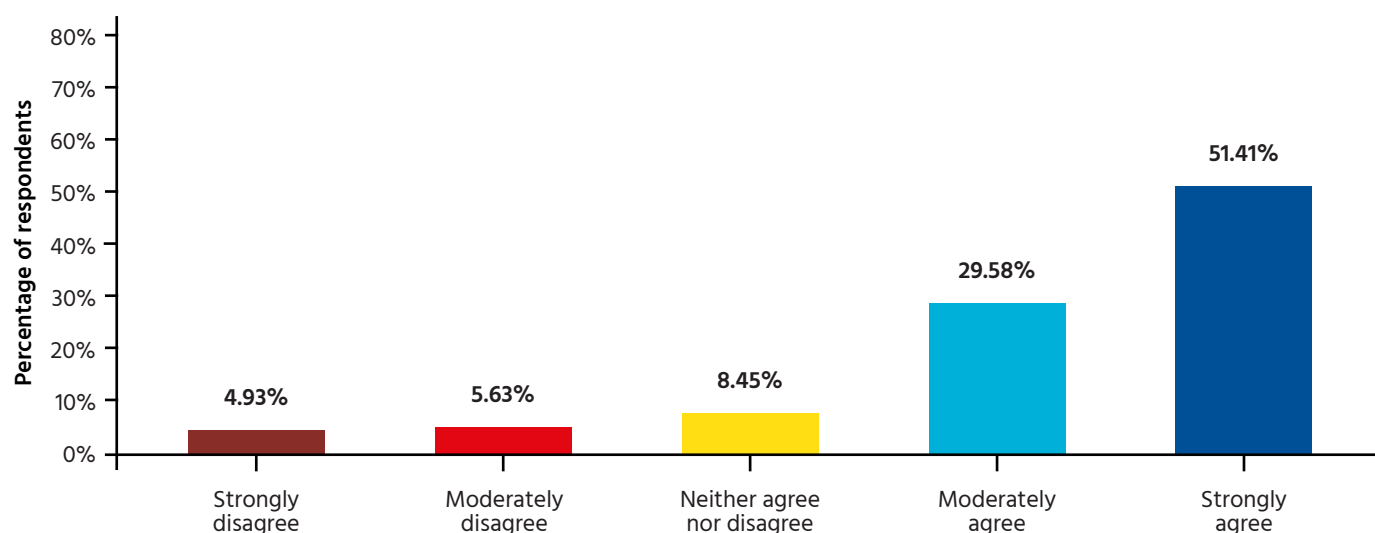
The WTO's founding Marrakesh Agreement provides for the adoption of plurilateral agreements into a section known as its Annex 4. Since its inception in 1995, the WTO has not added a single plurilateral agreement to Annex 4.

A handful of members, usually including India, Indonesia, and South Africa, often blocks the entry into Annex 4 of any plurilateral agreement. Unable to attain consensus, such deals on new areas of trade slide back into gridlock and set back the WTO's relevance. That is the limbo in which the plurilaterally-agreed WTO deals on e-commerce and investment facilitation now stand.

Classifying developed and developing countries

The WTO currently does not have a system to classify its members as developed or developing economies. Instead, it lets its members decide that for themselves. Two-thirds of WTO members say they are developing economies, including the world's second-largest and fifth-largest economies China and India. Others include South Africa, Indonesia, Qatar, and Singapore. Some economies designate themselves developed in some aspects of WTO negotiations and developing in others.² Along with the "developing" status comes a slew of trade privileges known as "special and differential treatment." Sharp differences now exist over whether such special and differential treatment has become entrenched as an immutable privilege for WTO members that designate themselves developing countries for that organization's purposes.

Question 9 – The WTO has no definition of “developed” and “developing” countries. Member countries are allowed to designate their own status. Should the WTO develop a clear definition of such criteria?



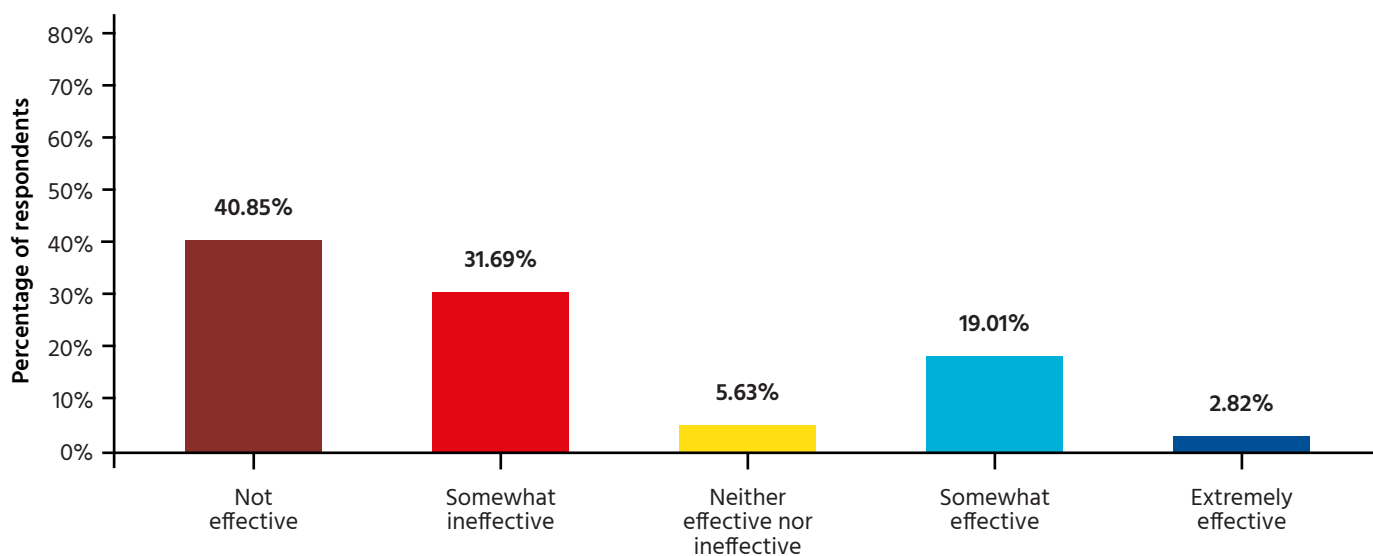
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Asked if the WTO should develop a clear set of criteria to itself classify members as developed or developing, 51% of respondents strongly agreed that it should; 30% moderately agreed; 8% couldn't decide; while 11% disagreed.

The survey provided a comment box for respondents. A full list of comments received from respondents is annexed to this report, along with the full set of survey results.

"Why do several large trading nations other than OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) member states, most notably Brazil, China, India and South Africa, continue to designate themselves as 'developing countries' in the WTO?" one respondent wrote. "Moving quickly to revoke such status would increase political pressure for the US to get fully engaged in the WTO reform process."

Question 3 – Is the WTO's decision-making process effective at managing the varying interests of its increasing and diverse membership?



Note: The Hinrich Foundation sent the survey to 27,665 respondents, evenly segmented into policymakers, trade practitioners, academia, and media covering North America, Europe, the Asia-Pacific, South America, and Africa and the Middle East.

The question of whether the “most favoured nation” principle remains inviolate, or whether it ought to be made more flexible to accommodate unprecedented realities, remains one of the most vexing aspects of WTO reform.

Effective decision-making with large and rising membership

When asked if the WTO’s decision-making process was effective at managing the varying interests of its increasing and diverse membership, 41% said it was not effective while 32% said it was somewhat ineffective. A combined 27% either couldn’t decide or said it was effective to some extent.

Dispute settlement system

One of the greatest problems that besets the WTO is the loss of its dispute settlement system. Frustrated on many fronts by the institution’s failure to move China to change its trade practices, among other issues, successive US administrations on a bipartisan basis have gutted the WTO’s dispute settlement system. The current Trump administration’s imposition of “reciprocal” tariffs, which unilaterally imposed unequal tariffs on different trading partners, upended whatever was left of American commitment to the multilateral trading system.

The retreat from global trade rules is doing irreparable harm to the international rules-based order. Interim arbitration arrangements at the WTO have not grown much in popularity, a sign of hesitation among WTO members to invest too much in the system.

Some 42% of survey respondents said paralysis in the WTO’s dispute settlement system has a high impact on the WTO’s effectiveness. Another 37% said the impact was “high-to-medium.” The rest, a combined 21%, indicated the impact ranged from low to medium.

Urgency for WTO reform

Respondents reflected a high sense of urgency for WTO reform.

Seventy-three percent of respondents said geopolitical tensions and trade fragmentation were extremely threatening to the multilateral trading system. Another 20% said they were moderately threatening. Only 2% said these factors were not threatening, while 4% were undecided.

If the WTO cannot produce an effective venue for multilateral trade negotiations or legally recognized rules that address the most pressing subjects of modern trade, including e-commerce, the digital economy, investment, competition, and the climate, the institution must reform or it will become defunct.

The most-favoured-nation principle

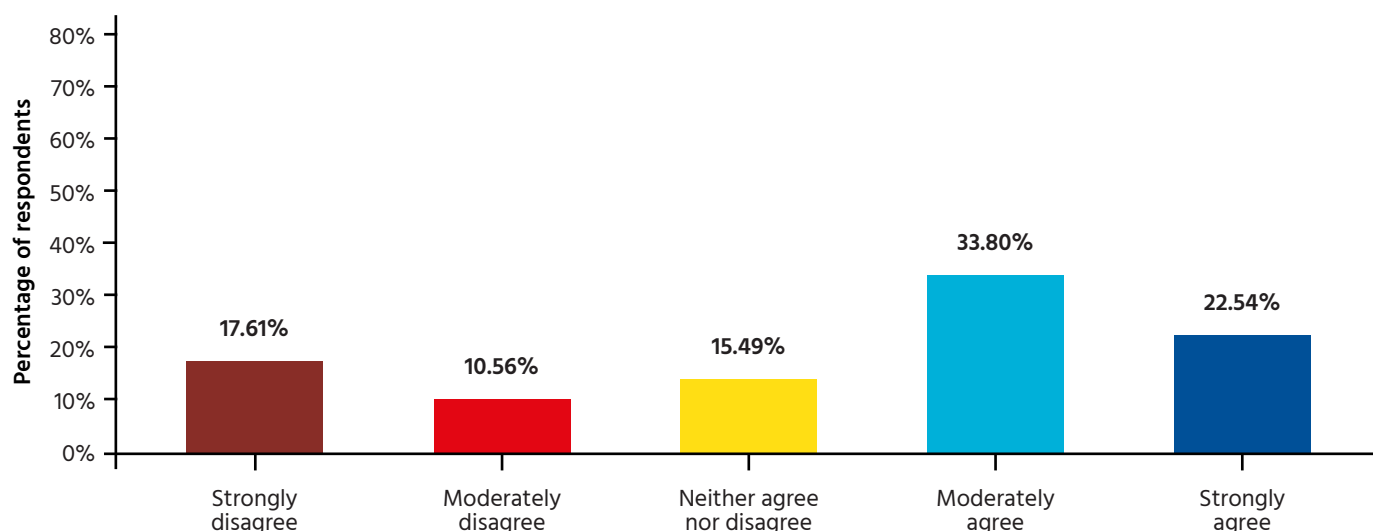
There was a relatively greater degree of differentiation of opinions on a question addressing the WTO’s most favoured nation (MFN) principle.

This is not surprising. The MFN principle is widely regarded as the bedrock of the multilateral trading system. The MFN principle, which is set out as Article 1 of GATT, required GATT parties – now WTO members – to extend equal treatment to all its fellow members on market access for traded products.

The question of whether the “most favoured nation” principle remains inviolate, or whether it ought to be made more flexible to accommodate unprecedented realities, remains one of the most vexing aspects of WTO reform. Some smaller nations believe that the MFN principle is the only assurance they have that they won’t get elbowed out on trade deals by larger economies.

Yet versions of an existing plurilateral agreement on e-commerce, co-convened by Australia, Japan, and Singapore, already include a novel provision that allows for a more flexible approach to the MFN principle. In the agreement’s Article 34, the MFN principle remains obligatory but the article leaves some flexibility on its application. The motivation, according to Hinrich Foundation reports³, was to allow wiggle room in an era dominated by the realities of the US-China geopolitical contest.

Question 8 – Should the WTO adapt to modern realities by updating the “most-favoured-nation” principle, which requires benefits negotiated by any member within the WTO to be extended to all?



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The WTO is one of the greatest legacies of the postwar peace.. The challenges before the world trading system are manifest. These are impossible to overcome under the current WTO rule-making and dispute settlement system. Reform is essential for the multilateral trading system. Failure is not an option.

A plurality of respondents, or 34%, said they moderately agreed that MFN should be updated as a principle, while 23% said they strongly agreed. Eighteen percent strongly disagreed; 11% moderately disagreed; and 15% couldn't make up their minds.

Conclusion and proposals

The results from the Hinrich Foundation's survey indicate that an overwhelming proportion of respondents believe the WTO must evolve.

Adaptation is key to survival. To be effective, the WTO's role requires brokering an environment of trust between governments, exporters, and consumers around the world.

Some thinkers have proposed ways in which the reform process could begin:

- The WTO's e-commerce plurilateral agreement, even as it continues to be blocked from Annex 4 by a handful of members, offers one template in which to frame and address otherwise sensitive questions in the WTO's structure.
- New Zealand Prime Minister Christopher Luxon and others have suggested that non-WTO free trade agreements, such as the 12-member Comprehensive and Progressive Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), could provide a fresh template in combination with the 27-member European Union. Together, these 39 economies, representing a wide swathe of global trade, could set out at least the shared vital underpinnings of a new multilateral order.
- Other proposals include a "double majority" voting system to approve new trade rules, with WTO decisions to be legally adopted once they are voted in by a majority of WTO members and/or members collectively representing a threshold percentage of world trade.
- And there remains, of course, Director-General Okonjo-Iweala's apparently stillborn idea for a panel of eminent persons. The United States blocked the proposal at the General Council on 19 February.

The WTO is one of the greatest legacies of the postwar peace. It provides many important functions for the global economy and international relations, including often unsung support, historical value, data and analytical resources, and a record of precedents that underpin any rules-based order.

The challenges before the world trading system are manifest. They ask whether current rules suffice when they are constructed around increasingly outdated precepts. In a new world of complex global supply chains, world trade rules must keep up. All these are impossible to accomplish under the current WTO rule-making and dispute settlement system.

The WTO has reached a dead-end. With the rapid growth in the numbers and diversity of membership, the WTO must embrace flexibility in the way it makes decisions. Reform is essential for the survival of the multilateral trading order, and failure is not an option.

Author bio and endnotes

As the program director for international trade research, Mr. Yap leads the Foundation's development of original research content.

Offering analysis and insights across the diverse domains of global trade, Mr. Yap spearheads the Foundation's mission through a research program of commissioned research and commentary, strategic partnerships and projects. Mr. Yap has had a distinguished journalism career in the United States and Asia specializing in trade and economic issues. Notably, his experience spans more than a decade in mainland China and Hong Kong with the Wall Street Journal. He began his career in Singapore's defense, trade, and finance ministries.

Mr. Yap holds degrees in history from Oxford University and international affairs from Columbia University.



Chuin Wei Yap

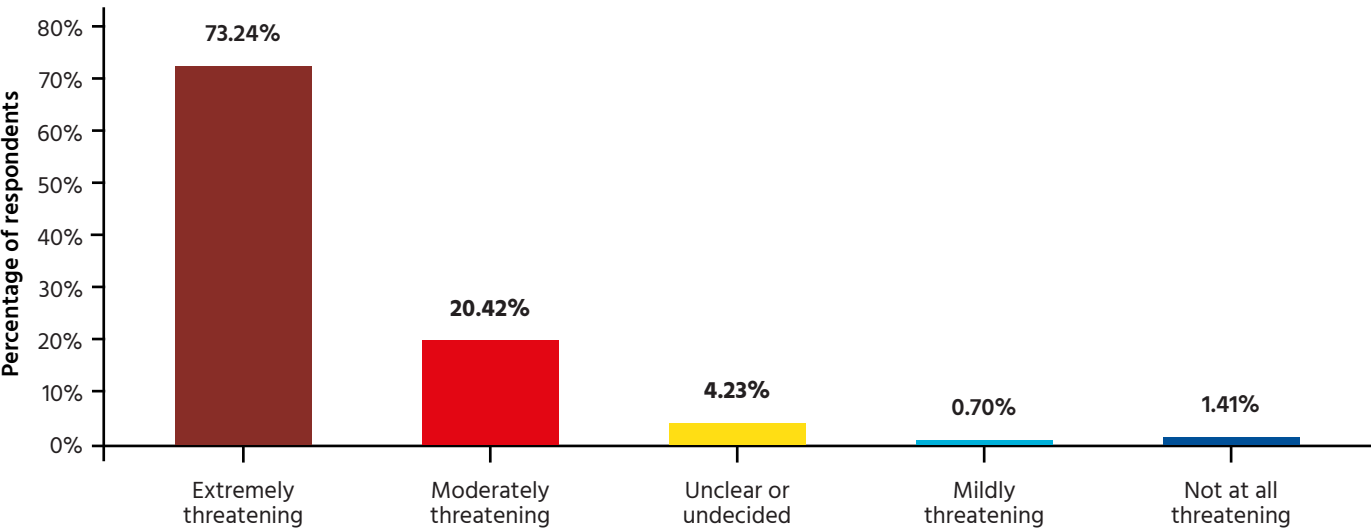
Program Director, International Trade
Research, Hinrich Foundation

Endnotes

1. The percentages referenced in this report on the survey's findings are rounded up and may not add up to 100%.
2. <https://www.hinrichfoundation.com/research/wp/wto/development-debate-at-the-wto-crisis>
3. <https://www.hinrichfoundation.com/research/wp/wto/national-security-question-at-the-heart-of-the-wto-e-commerce-deal>

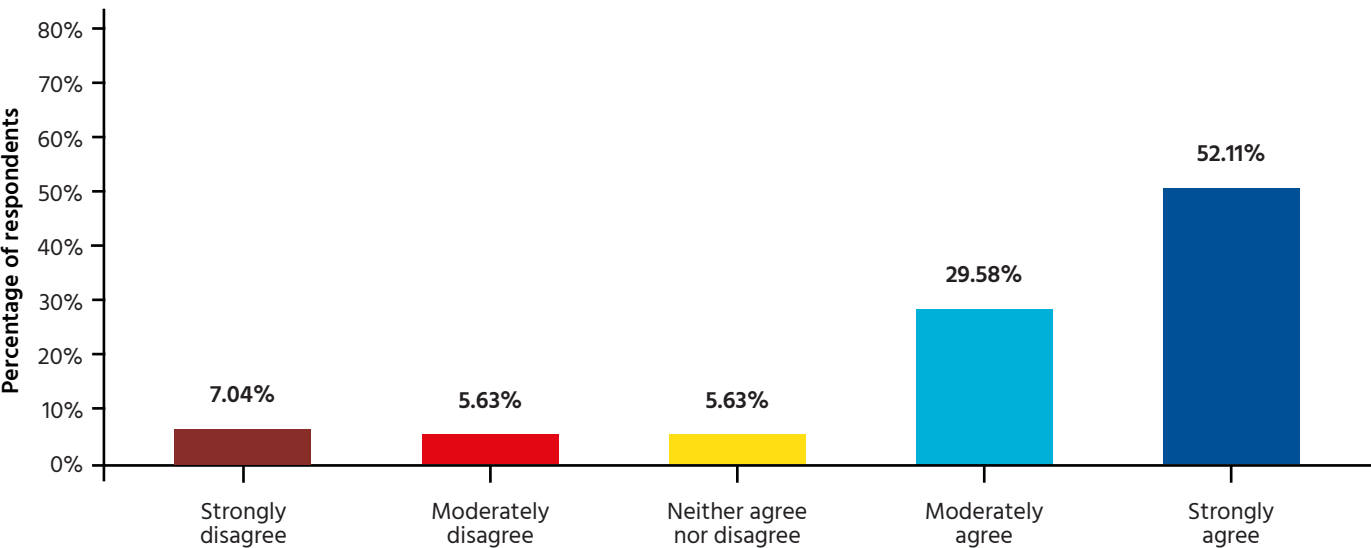
Annex

Question 1 – To what extent do you believe rising geopolitical tensions and trade fragmentation threaten the stability and importance of the global multilateral trading system?



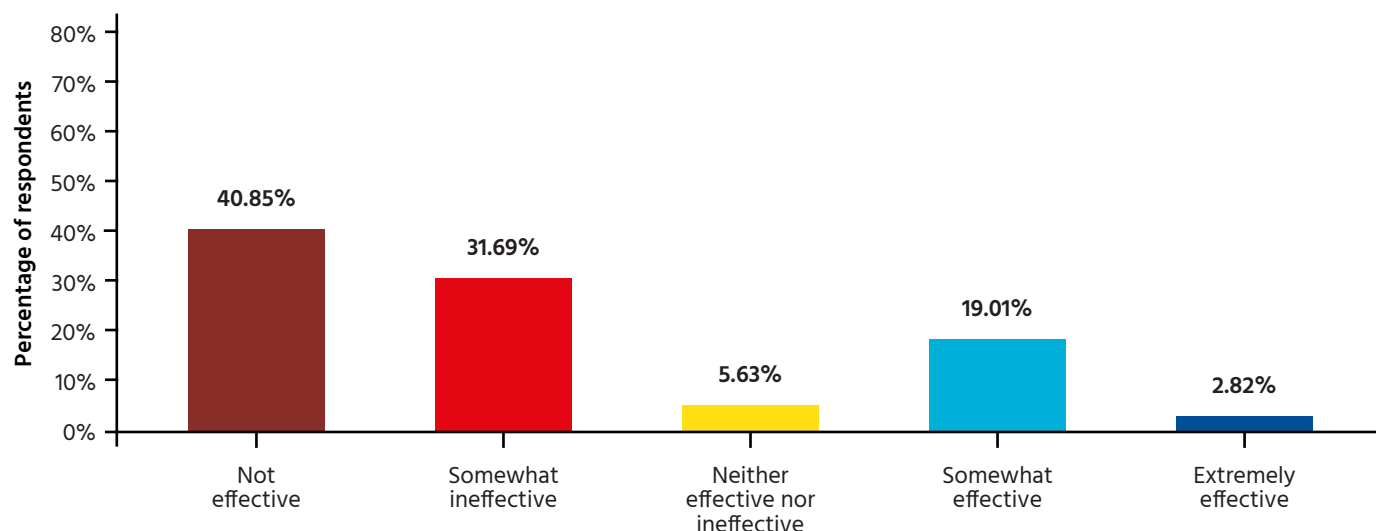
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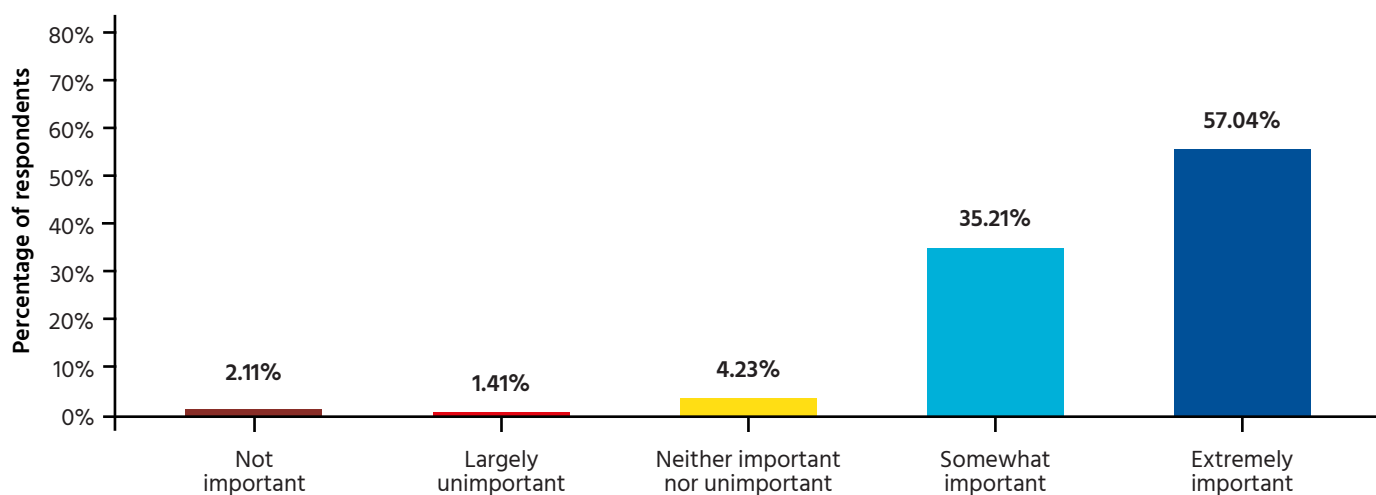
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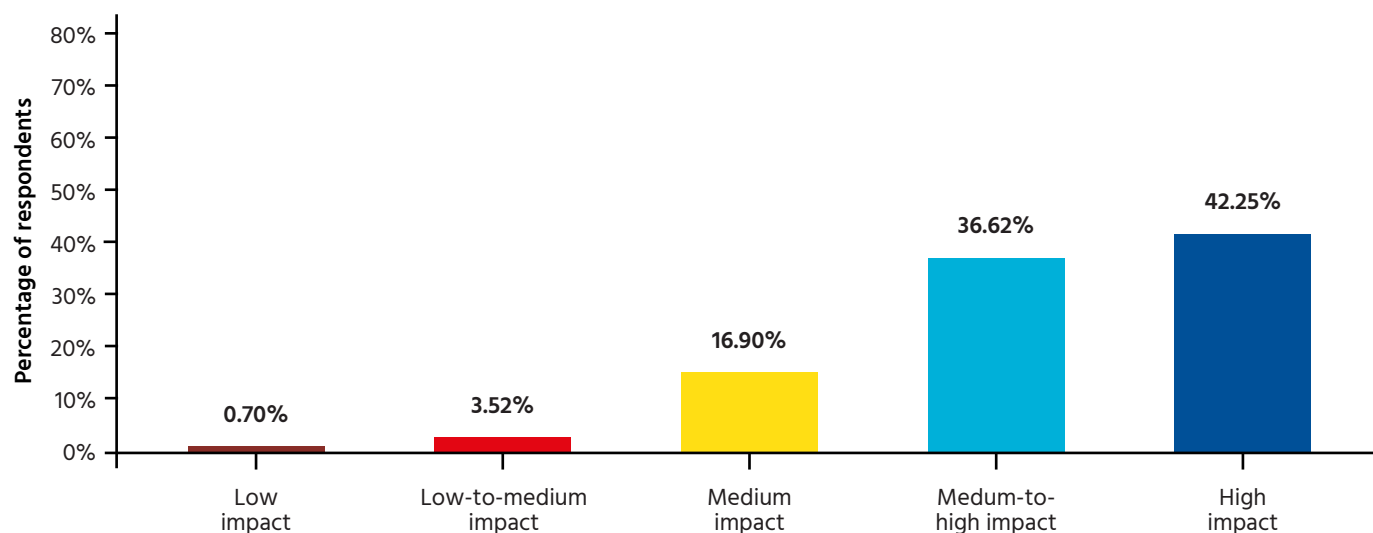
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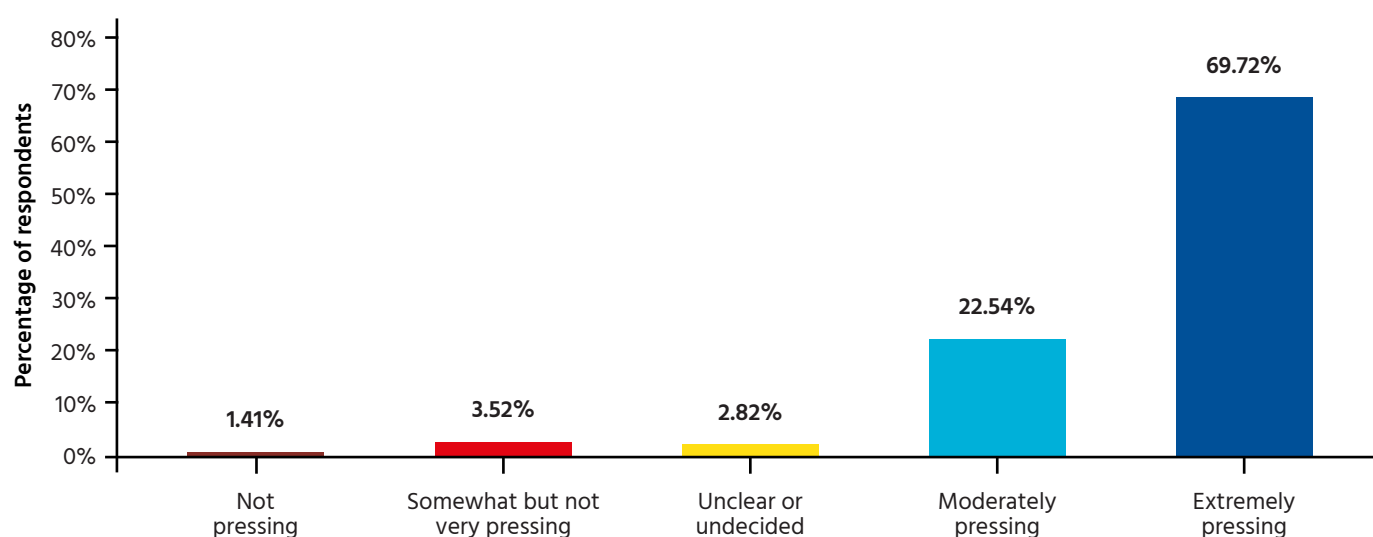
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Question 5 – To what degree has the paralysis in the WTO’s dispute settlement system, notably the Appellate Body, impacted the organization’s effectiveness?



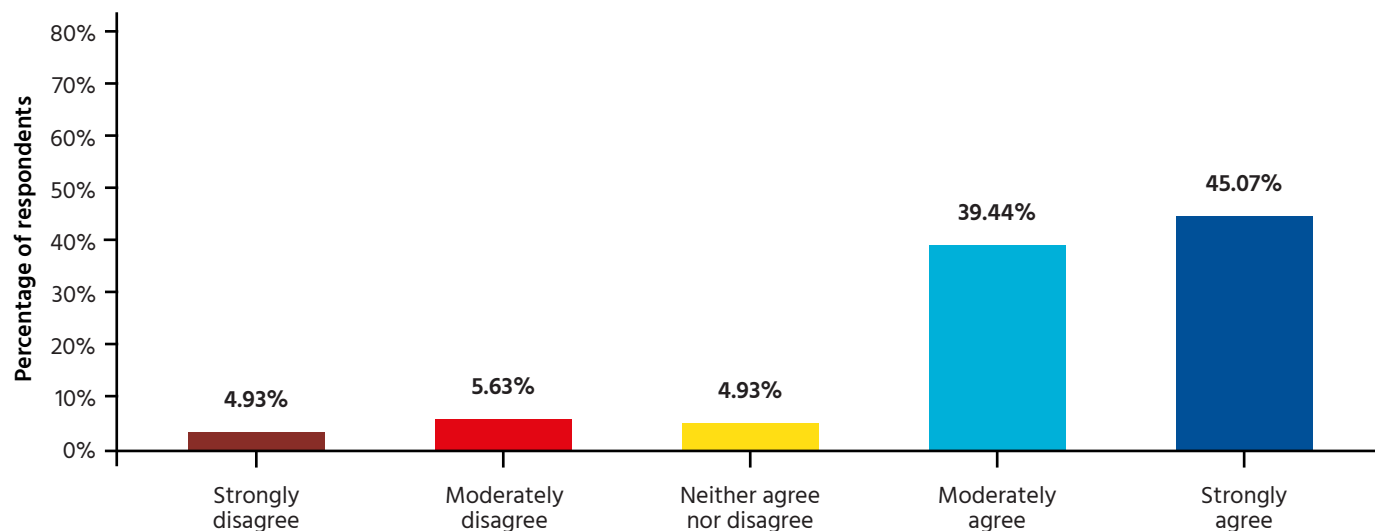
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Question 6 – How pressing is the need for the WTO to address its institutional and structural challenges, such as outdated rules and the need for adaptability to new trade realities?



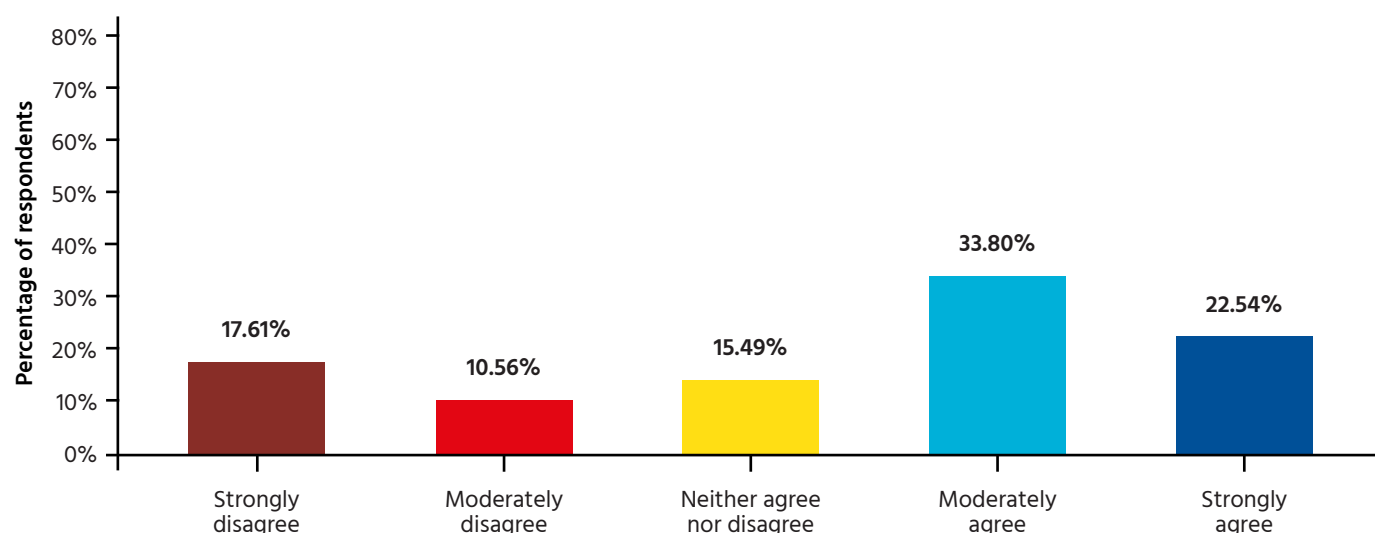
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Question 7 – Should the WTO adopt flexible approaches to legally recognize trade rules reached by smaller groups of members, without requiring unanimous agreement from all WTO members?



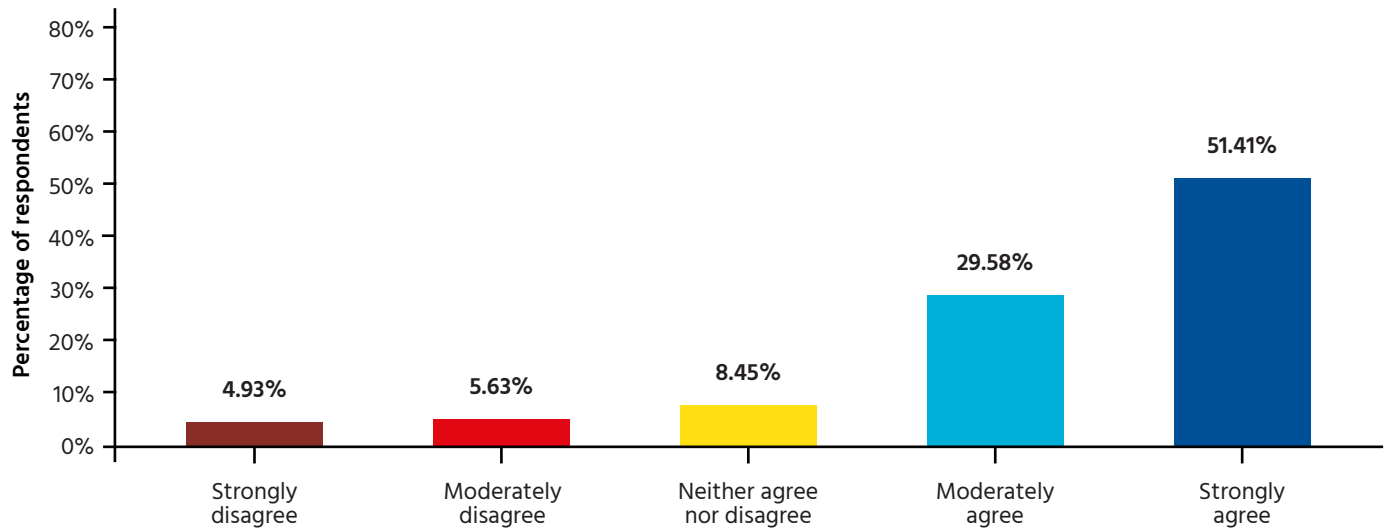
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Comments and feedback

We need countries to work hard to save the WTO.

Why do several large trading nations other than OECD member states, most notably Brazil, China, India and South Africa, continue to designate themselves as 'developing countries' in the WTO? Moving quickly to revoke such status would increase political pressure for the US to get fully engaged in the WTO reform process.

Without a commitment to rules based trade regime, WTO can only report data and highlight rule breakers. With out a broad commitment, there is no enforcement possible

WTO reform is necessary. But if major countries choose to ignore fundamental aspects of WTO principles, for domestic reasons or whatever, even a better-functioning WTO will not reign in threats to an open trade system

Despite the efforts of some well-meaning nations, the gaps between the US/EU? Canada et al, and The BRICS, are not likely to be bridged in the foreseeable future. Unfortunately, the WTO is at best on life support.

WTO is a vital part of international peace and commerce and development

For the WTO to survive, developing nations need to perceive that the WTO, its systems, and its processes are more authentically theirs, and dedicated to their interests too. As long as there is a perception that first-world hegemony and selective application remains ... the WTO remains vulnerable to hijack, gridlock, stasis, or at worst - irrelevance.

These are important subjects which need to be re-evaluated. Thanks for underlining them, as well as the valuable work of the Foundation, which I utilize.

At this point in time, it is essential that the WTO rethinks its role and processes to maintain relevance as an impartial international body to promote trade and prosperity.

The most important issues facing the WTO are: (a) the emergence of "connected devices" which were not contemplated when the WTO commitments were carved in stone in 1994 and which raise novel issues that need to be negotiated rather than dealt with through arbitrary tariffs; and (b) the routine emergence of economic coercion which requires a collective action response

WTO as all organizations migrate from original intent to vested interest which requires ceaseless vigilance not to be co-opted

The WTO system is not at fault. It's the current membership that selectively decides what to follow and what to disregard. Green room consultations are almost non-existent as is progress on agriculture reform. Single undertaking which allows for cross issue trade-offs and compromises has also been thrown out the window together with the DDA. We are paying the price of some Quad members only looking at their issues and disregarding areas where they are defensive such as agriculture support etc. we need stronger leadership at the WTO GC to tackle these issues. We have lost the art of deal making negotiations that allowed the WTO to be established 30 years ago. Do you think it was easy negotiating the UR. We need less lawyers and more economist at the WTO

WTO need reforms in terms of adapting itself to the changing realities of the new geoeconomic world order.

1. The WTO should use the World Bank definitions of developing countries (Low and Lower-Middle Income).
2. Consensus is the only way forward in spite of automaticity in the DSU.
3. Modifications to Article XXIV might be necessary for further progress.
4. Some countries (g., India) are deliberately using blocking tactics to limit progress on negotiations.
5. A better public understanding of the role of the WTO is needed in civil society.

We need in such a world where « impériums » are coming back rules to avoid trade war meaning to a certain extent war. Multilateralism but be flexible (unanimous rule is a limit to countries who want to go ahead to do it. We need criteria to define developing, émergent and développés countries But not only Financial one : natural Ressources, éducation Level, démographie évolution, Level of rule of law, démocratie and so on are several éléments among others which count. Maybe We could use (Odd criteria About ORD : panel of experts and médiateurs should be able to render a decision in 3 months to avoid national measures and anarchy. If Us Would leave (at the présent time) We are able to build multilatéral rules then Régional one. WTO must encourage régional areas such as EU, as een, Mercosur, ohada in Africa

After the advent of a New US protectionist administration There is no possibility of WTO reform

This exercise should not be tinkering with the current system, as this survey implies. The WTO cannot reform itself. The best Hinrich and other outsiders can do is to present an ideal model. Trust the governments to water it down to adjust to the political realities.

The WTO should focus on encouraging free (i.e. without tariffs or other protective impediments) between democratic countries, whilst eschewing trade with autocracies, so as to strengthen the former whilst weakening the latter.

The questions are to some extent leading. On the question about defining developing countries more clearly, in my view it should not be relevant. The rules should apply to all.

If WTO fails, alternative platforms will arise that erodes its effectiveness even more.

The depth of reform required might be beyond the capacity of the membership to agree upon.

Despite the efforts of some well-meaning nations, the gaps between the US/EU? Canada et al, and The BRICS, are not likely to be bridged in the foreseeable future. Unfortunately, the WTO is at best on life support.

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Comments and feedback

Given today's geopolitical tensions and North-South differences, the prospects for multilateral trade liberalization seem quite dim. Under these circumstances, it will be necessary to put more focus on WTO-consistent plurilaterals--which are also less likely to require a functioning dispute-settlement process.

We need countries to work hard to save the WTO.

The power to expel a member from the WTO would be useful

1. GDP remains the best metric rather than attempting to define "developing;"
2. Consensus needs to go but creating an "opt out" mechanism (or other protection for sovereign rights) is essential for any majority rule approach

The WTO is obsolete. It is likely to be superseded by a new consensus worked out between trading blocks. Trading blocks are in process of forming such as countries in China growing out of Belt and Road Initiative!

WTO should devise mechanisms to curb indiscriminate imposition of Tariffs by great powers against each other & on smaller states.

If WTO fails, alternative platforms will arise that erodes its effectiveness even more.

Drop the developed/undeveloped distinction entirely

The WTO needs to focus on a set of basic trade rules and facilitating cooperation between its members. It should stop delving into issues like climate and food security. There are other organizations that can deal with those matters. There are many developing/LDC members who are only interested getting benefits from the WTO agreements but not willing to do anything themselves. This is a direct result of the WTO giving priority over the last 25 years to the expansion of membership. Unwillingness of the membership to reform the DS system will eventually lead to the United States quitting the organization. Reform should have happened 10-15 years ago. Now it may be too late.

The 'modernisation' challenge for the WTO is hampered by the consensus rule, though equally many smaller economies appreciate the consensus rule as giving them a voice. While it would be good to address the definitional question (of developing country status) I am not sure that is the most pressing issue and it risks a distracting and debilitating fight among members

In relation to DC - update of what constitutes developing as most of the countries currently listed as DC or DCS are very much the opposite of this - especially in relation to manufacturing - particularly China, Asia in general and India - these markets are strong and are heavy producers of goods supplied globally and do not believe they would meet any definition of developing country given their export/import volumes globally.

Important survey, important questions. At the same time, soliciting an external group to provide input on WTO reform as suggested by the WTO DG is tone deaf and fails to recognize that the multiple previous examples of this led to nothing and were mostly detached from the reality of what members believe the first step in a reform process is to create a FOGS group as during the Uruguay Round. It would provide a systemic platform and would allow any and all issues to be raised. See literature on the systemic case for this @ peterpedersen

- 1) The WTO's consensus-based decision-making process is stuck and is impeding progress on key trade issues. How important is it to modernize the consensus-based decision-making process? Very important. Because if consensus cannot be achieved, no goal can be set. Without a goal, one cannot get exactly what one wants by using ideas and using these ideas.
- 2) To what extent has the paralysis in the WTO's dispute resolution system, especially the Appeals Board, affected the organization's effectiveness? Very much affected: Because this appeals board is one of the WTO's cogs, and if one cog fails, the others will certainly suffer the consequences of this disruptive movement. But can an alternative be created? Yes, by putting a link in the mechanism that will make the non-functioning cog work, this will give relief to the part that is or could be paralyzed.
- 3) How urgent is the need to address the WTO's institutional and structural challenges, such as outdated rules and the need to adapt to new trade realities? Very urgent. Because the WTO is very slow to update. If you pay attention, the world order has changed a lot in recent years after the coronavirus. Blocks have moved and politics has taken a more active role. Many countries that trade and are producers in the world have started to innovate their market search from scratch and have done this through the internet, which has increased its effectiveness. The effectiveness of the internet and politics has affected B2B trade organizations. While organizations with political ambitions have profited, organizations with weak opposition politics have left the female. The blood pumping into the veins they feed has stopped, which has led to the bankruptcy of some organs in world trade..I think the existence of the WTO is essential for the formation and support of innovative, non-political B2B Organized Trade Organizations.
- 4) Should the WTO adopt flexible approaches to legally recognize trade rules reached by smaller groups of members without requiring unanimous agreement from all WTO members? Yes. Because; It is not possible to grow without shrinking and without the small atoms of the situation. Let me explain; If the problem is big, the delegates will come at some point, the organization staff and units will already foresee that such an end may happen in advance and act prepared. But the problem starts small and will be deep if desired. Because no one cares about small problems and takes them seriously. This turns the problem into an unsolvable knot.
- 5) Should the WTO adapt to modern realities by updating the "most favored nation" principle, which requires that the benefits negotiated by any member within the WTO be extended to everyone? Yes. This is the same answer I gave in the third place. Some basic pillars in the world have shifted. This means reconsidering the balance of power. The support of the hardworking students who write the best success story, in other words, who do their homework best, is essential, not the favored ones. Establishing order is difficult, it is like patching up this broken order.
- 6) The WTO does not have a definition for "developed" and "developing" countries. Member countries are allowed to determine their own status. Should the WTO develop a clear definition for such criteria? No. If the WTO is going to give priority, as I have just stated, instead of making distinctions, it should give it to those who deserve it. Acting according to status is a thing of the past. Kingdoms no longer exist. A fair democratic order has prevailed. Discrimination is not possible in democracy either.

Note: The Hinrich Foundation sent the survey to 27,665 respondents, evenly segmented into policymakers, trade practitioners, academia, and media covering North America, Europe, the Asia-Pacific, South America, and Africa and the Middle East.

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