

# Trade as a Pathway to Peace: Multilateral Strategies for Stability in a Changing Global Order

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**Abstract:** *This research article investigates the intricate nexus between international trade and peacebuilding, positioning trade as a strategic instrument to mitigate conflict and foster global stability. Drawing from historical analysis, the study examines how trade has been leveraged as a pragmatic approach to peace, with particular emphasis on the evolving dynamics of US-China relations and their implications for global economic diplomacy. Central to the discourse is the revitalization of the World Trade Organization (WTO) through its Trade for Peace (T4P) initiatives, which seek to integrate fragile and conflict-affected states into the multilateral trading system as a pathway to reconstruction and peacebuilding. Employing qualitative and empirical evidence, this article analyzes the effectiveness of multilateral trade frameworks in reducing geopolitical tensions, enhancing dispute resolution mechanisms, and promoting economic interdependence. The findings reveal that while bilateral trade relations often face significant challenges, multilateral agreements under WTO auspices have demonstrated greater efficacy in sustaining peace and development in vulnerable regions. The article concludes by advocating for an interdisciplinary, cooperative approach to global trade policy that prioritizes peace as both a prerequisite and outcome of economic integration.*

**Keywords:** Trade for Peace, World Trade Organization (WTO), Economic Interdependence, Conflict Resolution, Fragile States

## 1. Introduction

The gargantuan and intricately interdependent structure of the modern global order is fundamentally and inescapably tethered to the mechanisms of international trade, which functions not merely as a facilitator of economic growth, but as a primordial and strategically aligned conduit for the cultivation of peace and diplomatic stability among sovereign states. Trade, in this context, transcends its economic utility to assume the role of a geopolitical instrument—an anchoring force that tempers the anarchic impulses of the international system by binding states into mutually beneficial relationships. This interconnectedness emerges not from idealism but from the harsh historical realities and lessons derived from the grotesque devastations of war, which have revealed the unsustainable costs of conflict and the necessity of alternative pathways to coexistence.

The most searing exemplar of this destructive potential is encapsulated in the horrors of the Second World War—a draconian cataclysm that resulted in the decimation of nearly 3% of the global human population, leaving in its wake not only physical ruin but also a profound psychological and moral reckoning.<sup>1</sup> In the aftermath of such unparalleled devastation, the global community was compelled to engage in an existential re-evaluation of the principles governing interstate relations. The consensus that emerged from the rubble of war was unambiguous: peace could no longer be sustained through the balance of power or military deterrence alone; it required the institutionalization of interdependence

through mechanisms that made war not only undesirable but economically irrational.

In pursuit of this vision, the post-war international architecture witnessed the establishment and gradual consolidation of multilateral institutions, most notably the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), which eventually evolved into the World Trade Organization (WTO).<sup>2</sup> The WTO now serves as the principal regulatory body orchestrating global trade, enforcing norms, resolving disputes, and ensuring a relatively stable framework for economic interaction among its member states. Its foundational mandate rests on the premise that structured trade liberalization and adherence to shared rules foster predictability, reduce friction, and ultimately disincentivize conflict.

This institutionalized belief in trade as a pacifying force is not novel. It traces its philosophical lineage back to Enlightenment thinkers such as Baron de Montesquieu, who, in the 18th century, presciently asserted that “Peace is a natural consequence of trade.” This proclamation encapsulates a timeless axiom: that commerce, by intertwining the fates of nations, cultivates a landscape in which the economic costs of war outweigh any perceived political or territorial gains. In other words, the more states are enmeshed in the global economic fabric, the less inclined they are to unravel it through militaristic aggression.

<sup>1</sup> Alex Andrews George, *Second World War (1939-1945): Causes and Consequences* - ClearIAS, (Oct. 25, 2016), <https://www.clearias.com/second-world-war/>.

<sup>2</sup> *From GATT to the WTO: An Overview - International Trade Law Research Guide* - Guides at Georgetown Law Library, <https://guides.ll.georgetown.edu/c.php?g=363556&p=4108235> (last visited Aug. 9, 2025).

Today, this Montesquieuan ideal remains both a guiding principle and a strategic imperative. In an era marked by geopolitical volatility, resurgent nationalism, and challenges to the liberal international order, the role of trade as a mechanism of peace-building assumes even greater significance.<sup>3</sup> To sustain global harmony, nations must reaffirm their commitment to cooperative economic engagement and resist the allure of protectionism and unilateralism. Only through such reaffirmation can the international community uphold the delicate equilibrium that has, thus far, kept large-scale conflict at bay and enabled unprecedented levels of prosperity and human development.

## 2. Historical Background

The inviolable and prodigious contributions toward the ideational edifice of "trade as a vehicle for peace" witnessed a significant amplification in the geopolitical discourse of the 20th century. This conceptual framework, which equates economic interdependence with geopolitical stability, found its earliest and most formidable articulation in the visionary diplomacy of President Woodrow Wilson of the United States. Wilson's promulgation of a peace-oriented international trade regime emerged as a paradigmatic shift from the traditional war-driven paradigms of statecraft. His doctrinal insistence on a non-punitive post-war reconstruction was a radical deviation from the hegemonic desires of other Allied powers, namely France and Britain, who remained preoccupied with exacting reparation from Germany, not through reciprocal economic engagement, but through economically debilitating indemnities.

Wilson, however, espoused a more magnanimous and conciliatory disposition—he advocated for a peace bereft of humiliation, devoid of punitive embargoes, and untethered from vengeful economic subjugation.<sup>4</sup> This enlightened worldview crystallized in his renowned "Fourteen Points," a corpus of diplomatic principles he enunciated during his 1919 address to the Paris Peace Conference, under the aegis of the nascent League of Nations. Among these points, Point III emerged as particularly cardinal, envisioning a transnational economic détente. It stipulated, in unequivocal terms, the "removal, so far as possible, of all economic barriers and the establishment of an equality of trade conditions among all nations consenting to the peace and associating themselves for its maintenance." This proposition was not merely a matter of commerce; it was an audacious philosophical reimagination of international order predicated on equity, access, and non-discrimination.

Yet, Wilson's lofty ambitions were soon eviscerated by the visceral pragmatism and entrenched parochialism of European policymakers. In subsequent decades, the ideological lineage of Wilson's trade-for-peace doctrine found renewed vigor under President Franklin D. Roosevelt. Cognizant of the interwar failures and the calamitous descent

into the Second World War, Roosevelt sought to resuscitate Wilsonian ideals through proactive diplomatic engagement. In a seminal 1941 meeting with British Prime Minister Winston Churchill at Argentia Bay, the two statesmen co-authored the Atlantic Charter—a foundational text delineating the philosophical contours of the post-war international order. Among its cardinal commitments was the pursuit of "equal access to trade and raw materials for all states—great or small, victor or vanquished—as prerequisites for their economic prosperity." This egalitarian ethos heralded a reinvigorated consensus around economic inclusion as a *sine qua non* for geopolitical stability.

The Atlantic Charter subsequently galvanized a wave of institutional architecture designed to entrench the primacy of trade in global governance. Most notably, the economic principles embedded in the Charter were championed by Keynes himself, who—despite his earlier reservations—led the British delegation to the Bretton Woods Conference of 1944.<sup>5</sup> There, the foundational contours of the modern international economic order were delineated, culminating in the creation of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (World Bank), with multilateral trade envisioned as a stabilizing fulcrum of interstate relations.

The embryonic aspirations of the 1919 Paris Conference were thus sublimated into the establishment of enduring multilateral trade mechanisms.<sup>6</sup> The Havana Charter of 1948 represented the first comprehensive articulation of a global economic covenant, seeking to institutionalize these ideals through the formation of the International Trade Organization (ITO). The preamble to the Charter was nothing short of alchemical in its aspirations—it explicitly recognized the imperative to create "conditions of stability and well-being which are necessary for peaceful and friendly relations among nations." Although the ITO was ultimately stillborn—its ratification thwarted by domestic opposition in the United States—its normative essence endured and was transposed into the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), instituted in 1947.

GATT functioned as the *de facto* guardian of the liberal trading system for the remainder of the 20th century, and its influence proved so pervasive that by its 50th anniversary in 1997, it was celebrated not merely as an economic accord, but as a doctrinal beacon of peace. The commemorative declarations emanating from that jubilee invoked the philosophical tenets of "Trade for Peace," issuing a resounding *clarion call* to reawaken the Wilsonian dream for a world reconciled through economic interdependence. In an age of resurging populism, trade wars, and fracturing alliances, this enduring vision was even echoed by voices such as Radio Free Europe in 1998, which valorized GATT not merely as a trade mechanism, but as a moral and

<sup>3</sup> *Why Peacebuilding Fails and What to Do about It* | Chatham House – International Affairs Think Tank, (May 25, 2023), <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2023/06/why-peacebuilding-fails-and-what-do-about-it>.

<sup>4</sup> *The Fourteen Points*, NATIONAL WWI MUSEUM AND MEMORIAL, <https://www.theworldwar.org/learn/peace/fourteen-points> (last visited Aug. 9, 2025).

<sup>5</sup> James P. Muldoon, *Architects of International Order: States, Markets, and Civil Society*, in *THE ARCHITECTURE OF GLOBAL GOVERNANCE* (2004).

<sup>6</sup> *Milestones in the History of U.S. Foreign Relations - Office of the Historian*, <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1914-1920/paris-peace> (last visited Aug. 9, 2025).

diplomatic enterprise designed to inoculate humanity against the scourge of war.

Thus, from the ruins of Versailles to the conference rooms of Bretton Woods, from the abortive Havana Charter to the enduring legacy of GATT, the philosophical and institutional trajectory of trade for peace reveals an unwavering commitment to the belief that commerce, when governed by equitable principles, possesses the transcendent capacity to tether nations together in mutual prosperity and enduring peace.

### The pragmatic approach in achieving peace through Trade

The cataclysmic upheaval unleashed by the Second World War precipitated a humanitarian decimation of staggering proportions, annihilating an estimated 85 million lives—approximately 3% of the global demographic.<sup>7</sup> This apocalyptic toll was concentrated disproportionately within the belligerent states, where the theatres of conflict exacted a toll not only through direct military engagements but also through indirect yet equally lethal mechanisms such as war-induced famine, epidemic outbreaks, and systemic societal collapse. Scholarly estimates delineate that nearly two-thirds of the total casualties were the result of direct martial hostilities, while the remaining third succumbed to the ancillary devastations of starvation, disease, and infrastructural obliteration—an unprecedented tableau of global despondency.

In the immediate aftermath of this epochal conflagration, the Allied powers promulgated declarations of peace across the devastated theatres of Europe and Asia during the years 1944 and 1945, respectively, in a concerted effort to reinstate normative civilizational equilibrium. These proclamations were not merely symbolic; they were instrumentalized as strategic foundations upon which the edifice of post-war international trade could be reconstructed. Notably, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), despite having initially expressed preliminary interest in the creation of an International Trade Organization (ITO), systematically abdicated from any substantial participation in its operationalization and refrained from endorsing the foundational Havana Charter—thus rendering itself a conspicuous absentee in the nascent multilateral trade governance framework.<sup>8</sup>

The pivotal disjunction between trade and peace was incisively addressed by U. S. President Harry S. Truman during his "Whistlestop" campaign of 1948, particularly in his address to agrarian constituencies. His rhetorical emphasis on agricultural abundance as a bulwark against the ideological encroachment of communism underscored a profound philosophical nexus between economic prosperity and geopolitical stability. Truman proclaimed, "In a very real sense, the abundant harvests of food in this country are saving the world from communism. Communism thrives on human

misery." He proceeded to assert that American agriculture functioned as an integral instrument of foreign policy—an assertion that imbued trade with strategic dimensions beyond mere commerce. His solemn assurance to the American populace that the federal apparatus was mobilized to exhaust "every instrument at our command" in pursuit of peace bespoke the elevation of trade to a geoeconomic doctrine.

The post-war convalescence also witnessed the embryonic evolution of supranational integration projects. In a seminal strategic maneuver, France and the United Kingdom commenced efforts to amalgamate their economic and military capacities in order to combat the existential menace posed by Nazi Germany. This initiative was catalyzed by the visionary architect of European unity, Jean Monnet, whose intellectual scaffolding became the substratum of the Schuman Plan. The Plan culminated in the establishment of the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) in 1951, a prototype of economic integration conceived as a peacekeeping mechanism.<sup>9</sup> By pooling control over industries critical to war-making—coal and steel—former antagonists could be rendered economically interdependent, thereby neutralizing the structural incentives for renewed conflict.

The axiomatic dictum that undergirded the Schuman Declaration was unambiguous: "World peace cannot be safeguarded without the making of creative efforts proportionate to the dangers which threaten it." This statement, more than a platitude, was a paradigmatic recalibration of international relations. The entanglement of German and French industries was envisioned to render future wars "not merely unthinkable, but materially impossible." This incipient vision of peace through economic interdependence extended to other European states, inviting them to dismantle protectionist barriers and coalesce into a transnational economic fraternity. As the declaration poignantly stated, "This production will be offered to the world as a whole without distinction or exception," signifying an egalitarian approach to global prosperity.

Moreover, the Schuman Declaration's prescient emphasis on international solidarity extended beyond Europe, positing that "with increased resources Europe will be able to pursue the achievement of one of its essential tasks, namely, the development of the African continent." This exemplified the aspirational ethos of post-war reconstruction, wherein trade was harnessed not merely as an economic utility, but as a vector for peace, equity, and international development.

The post-Cold War configuration of the EU, particularly after the dissolution of the Berlin Wall, saw Brussels assert the Union as a "peace project," explicitly linking enlargement to the EU's soft power mandate to "extend the zone of peace, stability, and prosperity on the continent." EU enlargement policy, notably toward the Western Balkans and Turkey, has consistently been anchored in the projection of trade-

<sup>7</sup> *Casualties of World War II | History of Western Civilization II*, <https://courses.lumenlearning.com/suny-hccc-worldhistory2/chapter/casualties-of-world-war-ii/> (last visited Aug. 9, 2025).

<sup>8</sup> P. T. Ellsworth, *The Havana Charter: Comment*, 39 AM. ECON. REV. 1268 (1949), <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1816603>.

<sup>9</sup> *Introduction - From the Schuman Plan to the Paris Treaty (1950-1952)*, <https://www.cvce.eu/en/recherche/unit-content/-/unit/5cc6b004-33b7-4e44-b6db-f5f9e6c01023/87e1dc9b-11b1-4232-8a1b-261dc50b6e95> (last visited Aug. 9, 2025).

facilitated peace. The Union's institutional design and trade architecture became instrumental in the democratic and economic transformation of post-communist states.

Parallel endeavors outside Europe also illustrated trade's pacifying potential. Between 1968 and 1990, West Germany's importation of coal, agricultural commodities, and manufactured goods from East Germany under a favorable credit scheme worth approximately \$700 million with a seven-year interest deferment effectively served to mitigate Cold War hostilities. This initiative exemplified the subtle wielding of trade as a mechanism of détente.

In East Asia, President Kim Dae-jung of South Korea inaugurated the "Sunshine Policy" in 1998, a diplomatic doctrine predicated on fostering economic rapprochement with North Korea through bilateral trade and investment channels. Though the policy's longevity was curtailed in 2016 due to political and strategic exigencies, it nonetheless garnered international recognition—including the Nobel Peace Prize—for its profound commitment to peacebuilding through commerce.

In the Middle East, the United States leveraged trade as a diplomatic tool by establishing a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) with Israel in 1985,<sup>10</sup> followed by similar economic arrangements with Jordan in 2001 and frameworks involving Palestinian territories. The Clinton Administration's introduction of Qualifying Industrial Zones (QIZs) in 1996 further institutionalized this effort, enabling duty-free access to U. S. markets for goods partially produced in Israel, Jordan, Egypt, or Palestine, contingent upon a minimum regional value-added component.<sup>11</sup> This innovative model not only incentivized cross-border cooperation but also embedded economic interdependence into the architecture of regional peace.

In South America, the formation of MERCOSUR in 1991—comprising Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay, and Uruguay—was conceptualized as a prophylactic against geopolitical antagonism, particularly between Argentina and Brazil, whose historical animosities and competition over natural resources had periodically edged toward confrontation. As analyzed by economists Philippe Martin, Thierry Mayer, and Mathias Thoenig, MERCOSUR played a critical role in diffusing potential military escalations by integrating economic interests.<sup>12</sup>

The case of Afghanistan, though distinct in geopolitical context, also illustrates the aspiration of utilizing trade as an instrument of peace.<sup>13</sup> Following the U. S. -led intervention in 2001, international actors, notably the United Nations, the World Bank, and regional stakeholders, sought to embed Afghanistan into regional trade networks to promote long-term stability. The Afghanistan-Pakistan Transit Trade Agreement (APTTA), signed in 2010, was intended to facilitate commercial flows between Afghanistan and South Asia, particularly providing landlocked Afghanistan with access to seaports.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, Afghanistan's accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2016 was heralded as a milestone toward economic normalization.<sup>15</sup> Although persistent conflict and political volatility have hampered the full realization of these objectives, the principle that trade could foster a more interconnected,<sup>16</sup> prosperous, and thus peaceful Afghanistan has remained a tenet of both Western and regional policy initiatives.<sup>17</sup> The proposed integration of Afghanistan into the Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation (CAREC) corridors and its alignment with the Lapis Lazuli trade route underscore continued multilateral ambitions to bind the country into broader trans-Eurasian trade regimes—aiming to supplant the legacy of war with economic interdependence.<sup>18</sup>

The contemporary manifestation of trade as a peacebuilding mechanism remains nuanced and contentious. U. S. -China relations, for instance, have vacillated between engagement and confrontation, with retaliatory tariffs during the Trump administration significantly escalating trade tensions. The Biden administration, despite rhetorical commitments to multilateralism, has hesitated to reverse these tariffs, particularly amid escalating tensions over Taiwan. Many scholars posit that a rollback of protectionist measures could rekindle constructive economic dialogue and contribute to regional stability.

Finally, the most recent paradigm of "Trade for Peace" is evidenced in the UK-EU Trade and Cooperation Agreement post-Brexit. This agreement, particularly its provisions for the Irish border, has been critical in preserving the fragile peace established by the Good Friday Agreement. The exponential growth in trade between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland in 2021 underscores the efficacy of economic integration as a stabilizing force. Where barbed wire and military watchtowers once symbolized division, seamless cross-border commerce now stands as a testament to peace forged through trade.

<sup>10</sup> U.S. - Israel Free Trade Agreement, <https://www.trade.gov/us-israel-free-trade-agreement> (last visited Aug. 9, 2025).

<sup>11</sup> 1166, *Qualifying Industrial Zones*, <https://www.trade.gov/qualifying-industrial-zones> (last visited Aug. 9, 2025).

<sup>12</sup> *Mercosur: South America's Fractious Trade Bloc | Council on Foreign Relations*, <https://www.cfr.org/background/mercosur-south-americas-fractious-trade-bloc> (last visited Aug. 9, 2025).

<sup>13</sup> Sayed Qudrat Hashimy, *Role of WTO in Afghanistan's Path to Sustaining Peace Through Trade*, 63 INDIAN J. INT. LAW 80 (2024).

<sup>14</sup> *Afghanistan-Pakistan Transit Trade Agreement (APTTA) - Civilsdaily*, (Jul. 15, 2020), <https://www.civildaily.com/news/afghanistan-pakistan-transit-trade-agreement-aptta/>.

<sup>15</sup> Sayed Qudrat Hashimy & MS Benjamin, *Legal Implications of Afghanistan's WTO Accession on Trade and IPR Systems*, 1 MYSORE UNIV. LAW J. 26 (2024).

<sup>16</sup> Sayed Qudrat Hashimy & Jackson Simango Magoge, *Role of WTO in the Promotion of Trade and IPR in Afghanistan*, 7 J. ECON. FINANCE (2021), <https://papers.ssrn.com/abstract=4043959>.

<sup>17</sup> Sayed Qudrat Hashimy, *Rethinking Diplomacy: Afghanistan's Trade Renaissance*, 2 VBCL LAW REV. (2024), <https://www.vbcllawreview.com/archives>.

<sup>18</sup> breezy, *Regional Cooperation and Integration: CAREC Program*, (Nov. 17, 2021), <https://www.adb.org/what-we-do/topics/regional-cooperation/carec>.



### The USA and China Relations

Among the ascendant hegemonic forces within the contemporary global economic landscape, the United States of America and the People's Republic of China indisputably emerge as paramount actors whose bilateral commercial engagements often oscillate between strategic cooperation and structural antagonism. These interactions are periodically punctuated by geopolitical frictions and normative divergences, particularly in domains of trade governance, subsidy regimes, and regulatory asymmetries. Providentially, the institutional architecture of the World Trade Organization (WTO) encompasses a Dispute Settlement Mechanism (DSM) which, at least in theory, operates as a juridical buffer against the deterioration of such frictions into full-blown economic hostilities. Historically, this institutional mechanism has served as a stabilizing instrument, tempering the vicissitudes of bilateral trade discord and allowing the continuity of commerce to prevail over adversarial posturing.

This paradigm was, in fact, observable in the trajectory of Japan's post-war economic ascendancy during the latter half of the twentieth century, which elicited comparable consternation from the United States. The subsequent invocation of multilateral trade disciplines, particularly under the auspices of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) and later the WTO, functioned to modulate trade tensions. In this historical parallel, China now finds itself replicating a similar pattern, wherein its unprecedented economic expansion, dominance in global export markets, and strategic industrial policies are perceived by the United States and its Western allies as emblematic of unfair trade advantages.

Nonetheless, despite the nominal recourse to WTO protocols, the efficacy of the Appellate Body—once the crowning jewel of the dispute adjudication framework—has increasingly come under scrutiny. The quantum leap in bilateral trade interdependence between China and the United States has not been mirrored by a commensurate advancement in institutional conflict resolution. The WTO has struggled to define, let alone enforce, countervailable and actionable subsidy disciplines vis-à-vis state-owned enterprises (SOEs)—a structural feature deeply embedded in the Chinese economic model. The Appellate Body has been hamstrung by procedural paralysis and doctrinal ambiguity, unable to cogently arbitrate on issues such as industrial subsidies, intellectual property enforcement, and the extraterritorial implications of national treatment principles.

Indeed, the absence of binding plurilateral or bilateral trade agreements specifically calibrated to address Sino-American trade disputes has further accentuated the WTO's institutional limitations. In contrast to intra-WTO arrangements among other member states—such as those underpinning regional free trade agreements—the Sino-American dyad lacks bespoke instruments to facilitate cooperative compliance or structured renegotiation. This institutional void has engendered an environment wherein WTO rulings are either selectively implemented or altogether disregarded, thereby eroding the legitimacy and operational integrity of the multilateral trading system.

A particularly contentious point of divergence pertains to China's persistent invocation of its "developing country" status, thereby seeking to avail itself of Special and Differential Treatment (SDT) under the WTO framework, including the benefits accorded to Most Favoured Nation (MFN) trading status. The United States and other advanced industrial economies increasingly challenge this designation, arguing that China's techno-industrial prowess—exemplified by its ambitions in lunar exploration, artificial intelligence, quantum computing, and its status as the preeminent global exporter of manufactured goods—renders the developing country claim both anachronistic and strategically disingenuous.

While China highlights its vast domestic demographic disparities and pervasive poverty in rural hinterlands to justify SDT eligibility, the U. S. posits that such claims are undermined by China's global economic footprint and state-sponsored economic expansionism. This dialectical tension underscores a deeper epistemological divergence between economic classification and geopolitical perception, wherein China's sui generis developmental trajectory challenges the binary taxonomy of "developed" versus "developing" within WTO jurisprudence.

In theory, both the United States and China could have constructively engaged through the institutional scaffolding of the WTO to mediate and resolve such disputes. The Dispute Settlement Mechanism, if operationalized with good faith and institutional support, could have served as a neutral adjudicator, facilitating jurisprudential clarity and preventing escalatory trade confrontations. Moreover, mutual engagement on transnational concerns such as climate change mitigation, global public health governance, and sustainable development could have functioned as confidence-building measures, fostering normative convergence and institutional trust.

However, empirical evidence suggests otherwise. The two countries have exhibited a conspicuous reluctance to employ the WTO as a genuine platform for mutual reconciliation. A salient example of this inertia is their lack of meaningful engagement during the WTO's Twelfth Ministerial Conference (MC12), particularly regarding the waiver under the Agreement on Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS). Despite the opportunity to converge on a temporary intellectual property reprieve to facilitate global vaccine equity—a move that could have embodied the synergistic potential of trade and peace—the absence of coordinated Sino-American alignment reflected the broader collapse of multilateral solidarity.

Thus, the WTO, while architecturally poised to arbitrate and normalize the systemic disruptions emerging from great power trade rivalries, has been rendered inert by political obduracy, normative incoherence, and institutional fatigue. The Sino-American economic entanglement remains a complex amalgam of strategic competition and reluctant interdependence—wherein trade, once envisioned as a pacifying force, increasingly operates as both a conduit of cooperation and a theatre of conflict.

### Tryst with Trust: WTO Renaissance in the Making

The multilateral trading system, under the stewardship of the World Trade Organization (WTO), currently stands at a critical inflection point—torn between institutional endurance and the urgent imperative for systemic recalibration. The erosion of intergovernmental trust and the widening chasms of geopolitical asymmetry among member states have precipitated a global policy impasse, where trade relations—particularly between economically and ideologically divergent actors—are mired in a labyrinth of normative contradictions, juridical ambiguities, and strategic inertia. Amidst these tensions, the WTO's *raison d'être* is undergoing a profound re-examination, recasting it not merely as an adjudicator of commercial disputes but as a normative custodian of global economic equity, peace, and inclusive development. The aftermath of the WTO's Twelfth Ministerial Conference (MC12), convened in Geneva against the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic and global food insecurity, signaled a renaissance in the organization's normative posture. One of its most consequential outcomes was the exemption of World Food Programme (WFP) humanitarian food purchases from export restrictions—an unprecedented move that affirmed the moral dimensions of trade, emphasizing its catalytic role in mitigating hunger, poverty, and humanitarian crises. Moreover, the WTO has increasingly intensified its engagement with fragile and conflict-affected states, recognizing that peace and economic development are symbiotically interlinked. This recalibrated approach emphasizes context-sensitive trade facilitation and accession support, tailored to address the root causes of state fragility, from institutional disintegration and political instability to post-conflict reconstruction. Within this transformative framework, the emergence and consolidation of the G7+ WTO Accession Group stands as a beacon of cooperative diplomacy—an alliance of conflict-affected and least developed countries (LDCs), including Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan, Timor-Leste, Comoros, and São Tomé and Príncipe, all aspiring toward WTO membership as a vehicle for economic reintegration, legitimacy, and peacebuilding. These aspirants have joined the path once navigated by Afghanistan, Liberia, and Yemen, who successfully acceded in 2016 and 2014 respectively, using WTO membership to reinforce their post-conflict recovery. At Ministerial Conference 11 (MC11) in Buenos Aires, the G7+ cohort initiated a platform for intra-group solidarity, mutual technical support, and policy dialogue, leveraging the WTO as a neutral, rules-based institutional mechanism for conflict transformation and economic inclusion.<sup>19</sup> Their commitment to align domestic reforms with WTO disciplines is emblematic of a broader ambition: to embed fragile economies within the normative infrastructure of global trade and to transform commerce into a conduit for peace. In this light, the WTO accession process itself evolves from a technical integration exercise into a geopolitical experiment

in economic diplomacy and post-conflict reconciliation. Through this process, fragile states are able to amplify the rule of law, institutionalize transparent trade practices, attract foreign investment, enhance regional cooperation, and build administrative capacities. For these countries, trade is not merely instrumental to peace—it is its scaffolding, its foundation, and its future. This engagement reflects a broader philosophical reorientation within the WTO, towards a more inclusive, context-aware, and trust-based multilateralism. The application of the Dispute Settlement Understanding (DSU), historically dominated by large economies, is increasingly being considered as a replicable model of conflict mediation even among G7+ members—formal or otherwise—thereby promoting legal predictability and institutional accountability in post-conflict regions.<sup>20</sup> In facilitating these accession-led frameworks, the WTO is enacting a quiet yet profound renaissance—a “tryst with trust”—reclaiming its foundational mission as a forum not only for market liberalization but also for the tempering of asymmetries and the cultivation of peace. The G7+ nations, having endured cycles of conflict, dislocation, and fragility, are now at the vanguard of a new WTO ethos, where trade is neither purely transactional nor solely regulatory but transformative and regenerative. Their arduous journey through accession is not merely for tariff relief or market access, but for the reclamation of sovereign dignity, economic self-determination, and peaceful integration into the global community of nations.<sup>21</sup>

### WTO's Trade for Peace (T4P) Initiatives

The Trade for Peace (T4P) initiative,<sup>22</sup> launched formally by the World Trade Organization (WTO) between 2018 and 2021, represents a transformative evolution in how global trade mechanisms intersect with peacebuilding and conflict resolution. Initially rooted in the WTO accession process for fragile and conflict-affected countries, T4P was institutionalized through the “Trade for Peace Programme” in 2021, structured upon four core pillars. Firstly, the WTO has actively facilitated high-level political engagement through the g7+ WTO Accession Group, bringing together fragile states seeking WTO membership to create a diplomatic and developmental coalition, supported by international partners and donors. These engagements aim to enable these states to not only integrate into the global trading system but also to strengthen governance and institutions as a path toward long-term peace. Secondly, recognizing the critical role of public participation, the WTO launched the Trade for Peace Week and an accompanying podcast series to foster a global “peace community,” where policymakers, scholars, civil society actors, and the general public converge to explore the synergy between trade and peace. Thirdly, the initiative places strong emphasis on the generation and dissemination of knowledge through a dedicated Knowledge Hub, which serves as a central platform for research, data, and analysis on the trade-

<sup>19</sup> WTO | Ministerial Conferences - Eleventh WTO Ministerial Conference - Buenos Aires, [https://www.wto.org/english/thewto\\_e/minist\\_e/mc11\\_e/mc11\\_e.htm](https://www.wto.org/english/thewto_e/minist_e/mc11_e/mc11_e.htm) (last visited Aug. 9, 2025).

<sup>20</sup> *Dispute Settlement and Efficacy of the Multilateral Trading System | Economic and Political Weekly*, (Nov. 16, 2024), <https://www.epw.in/journal/2024/46/global-value-chains/dispute-settlement-and-efficacy-multilateral.html>.

<sup>21</sup> *The Multilateral Trading System (Part II) - Revitalizing the World Trading System*, <https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/abs/revitalizing-the-world-trading-system/multilateral-trading-system/0CEDE943B60F3E54663BFAEE7C6EEE3A> (last visited Aug. 9, 2025).

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peace nexus. This hub enables policymakers and practitioners to forecast the peace dividends of economic integration and informs evidence-based policymaking for fragile economies. Finally, the WTO has committed to a comprehensive capacity-building agenda, delivering specialized training that ranges from executive education to graduate-level learning, ensuring that knowledge of trade mechanisms and peacebuilding strategies permeates both elite institutions and grassroots structures. Collectively, these pillars encapsulate a redefined vision of multilateral trade governance—one that transcends economic objectives to embrace peace as a foundational goal. The Trade for Peace Programme, therefore, stands as a pivotal framework in reimagining global trade not merely as an instrument of commerce, but as a profound vehicle for diplomacy, reconstruction, and enduring global stability.

### Tail Piece; A Pragmatic Conclusion

The aftermath of World War I left a catastrophic toll on humanity, with an estimated 40 million casualties encompassing both the dead and the wounded. Among these staggering figures, approximately 20 million lives were lost, and another 21 million individuals suffered debilitating injuries. Within this grim total, around 9.7 million were military personnel who perished in the throes of battle, while nearly 10 million innocent civilians fell victim to the ravages of war, caught in the crossfire of geopolitical turmoil and brutal combat. In this somber context, the concept of "Trade for Peace" emerged as a beacon of hope, passionately championed by then U. S. President Woodrow Wilson. Amidst a world ravaged by conflict and desperation, Wilson envisioned trade not merely as an economic instrument but as a profound mechanism to foster international cooperation, reduce hostilities, and ultimately safeguard global stability. However, despite the visionary aspirations encapsulated in Wilson's famous Fourteen Points, the momentum necessary to translate this ideal into tangible global policy was insufficient to prevent the descent into World War II, as nations struggled to reconcile competing interests and surmount entrenched animosities.

In the decades that followed, the world came to recognize the urgent necessity of establishing an institutional framework dedicated explicitly to regulating and promoting peaceful trade relations. This realization culminated in the creation of the World Trade Organization (WTO), an international body entrusted with overseeing global trade with the dual aims of facilitating lucrative commercial exchange and fostering peaceful interoperation among nations. Central to this mission is the WTO's Trade for Peace Programme—an ambitious and comprehensive initiative tailored to fragile and conflict-affected countries. By enhancing and institutionalizing mechanisms such as the Dispute Resolution System, the programme endeavors to provide these vulnerable states with viable, peaceful alternatives to conflict, embedding trade as a foundational pillar of peacebuilding and economic recovery.

This vision was eloquently echoed in 2018 by a representative from Afghanistan during a high-level meeting on the nexus between trade and peace. The delegate emphasized the indispensable role of integrating least developed countries and conflict-ridden states into the international trading system as a critical pathway to national reconstruction and

peacebuilding. "Trade," the representative asserted, "can help these countries devise pathways out of conflict," underscoring the transformative potential of economic inclusion in healing war-torn societies.

Yet, the harsh realities confronting many fragile states remain daunting. The plight of famished mothers and malnourished children in poverty-stricken regions continues unabated, their suffering exacerbated by the lingering effects of conflict and economic instability. The global shockwaves of the COVID-19 pandemic further destabilized food security and precipitated unprecedented waves of irregular migration, compounded by the multifaceted crises of climate change. These converging calamities have inflicted severe setbacks on development trajectories worldwide, particularly in vulnerable economies. The pandemic not only exposed systemic weaknesses but also sounded an alarm regarding the inevitability of future global health crises, while deepening socio-economic inequalities and triggering rampant inflation. Developing and least developed countries, constrained by limited fiscal space and forced into deficit financing, have borne the brunt of these compounded challenges.

Within this volatile global milieu, conflict hotspots such as Ethiopia, Afghanistan, and the Korean Peninsula have increasingly turned to the WTO's Trade for Peace (T4P) programme for guidance and support. The evidence has been compelling: while bilateral trade agreements often falter due to their limited scope and the absence of alternative partners, multilateral trading frameworks have demonstrated greater efficacy in sustaining peace and fostering economic resilience in fragile contexts.

The architects of T4P astutely recognized trade not merely as a commercial endeavor but as a strategic instrument to transcend belligerency, to channel the radical essence of human existence—our collective aspiration to flourish and thrive—into frameworks of cooperation and peace. The WTO's Trade for Peace initiative exemplifies this ethos through its meticulously crafted, interoperative, and interdisciplinary approach within the multilateral trading system. By harmonizing diverse economic policies and aligning them with peacebuilding objectives, T4P represents a sophisticated blueprint for leveraging trade as a transformative force. In doing so, it transcends traditional economic paradigms, embedding the principles of peace, stability, and sustainable development at the heart of international trade governance. Thus, the programme not only aspires to heal the scars of conflict but also to chart a course toward a more just, equitable, and peaceful global order.

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