
Between Liberalism and Protectionism: Reassessing the Dynamics of Global Trade in the WTO Era

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Abstract

The question of free trade and protectionism has been central to international trade and a symptom of the long-standing problem of balancing economic performance and national sovereignty. Trade policies, influenced by a strong historical tradition, have swung between liberalism, in the classical comparative advantage conceptions, and protectionist policies, founded on mercantilist and infant industry theory. The roles of international laws, or more precisely the role of the WTO system, highlight the possibilities of a rules-based order and the persistent inequalities that the developing economies struggle to navigate through the maneuvers of the complex disputes. In the meantime, globalization and technological change create a possibility of cooperation, especially in such areas as digital trade, environmental standards, and resilience of the supply chain. In order to analyze the character of the relationship between protectionism and free trade as they coexist in contemporary discourse of equity, growth, and world governance, one should possess an excellent theoretical background. In this paper, the dynamics are analyzed with the view of offering information on more inclusive trade practices.

Keywords: Education, Historical Context, Laws, Opportunities, Theoretical Context

Introduction

Free trade and protectionism continue to dominate the international economic affairs, with the debate defining the policies that affect the dominance of trade, market access, and international relations (Ryu, 2025; Tessman, 2022). The proponents of free trade support lowering the barriers to increase the level of economic efficiency and global unity, whereas the proponents of protectionism encourage the local industries by implementing tariffs and quotas, which are commonly explained by the security of the nation or economic independence (Rui-Ke, 2023; Ryu & Kim, 2024). This conflict is best demonstrated by the World Trade Organization (WTO), whereby member states find ways of managing the clashes between these two opposing paradigms (Eddy, 2023; Raju, 2022).

Ethical and practical issues of this dichotomy include the unequal effects of protectionism on the developing economies or the loss of the local industries in the free trade regime (Dannerhall, 2023). The Dispute Settlement Body (DSB) of the WTO is essential in resolving these conflicts, but its effectiveness is doubted due to the increasing nationalist approaches (Bethlehem et al., 2022). Also, language barriers and unequal power relations make dispute resolutions more difficult, putting smaller nations at a disadvantage (Mostafiz, 2024).

This debate is compounded by the fact that cultural identity and economic policy interact. As an example, protectionism is frequently described as safeguarding national tradition or jobs, and free trade is promoted as leading to innovation and consumerism (Du & Ye, 2023). However, the lack of equity in the gains of globalization (e.g., supply chains revealing their vulnerability in response to the COVID-19 pandemic) has rekindled the debate about strategic protectionism, even in historically liberal economies (Rui-Ke, 2023). Meanwhile, the WTO's struggle to adapt to digital trade and environmental standards underscores the need for reforms that reconcile ethical trade practices with 21st-century challenges (Raju, 2022; Ryu

& Kim, 2024;). This paper looks at the historical background, theories, and issues of this international struggle and provides a reflection on creating economic development and fair trade (Bethlehem et al., 2022; Tessman, 2022).

Research Justification

This paper is a critical analysis of the tension in the world between free trade and protectionism, and considers the long-term policy dilemma of modern trade governance. Three major gaps in the literature should justify the research: First, to begin with, although the argument is well known in both classical and modern economic theory, there is a lack of integration between the old and new. The literature has examined free trade and protectionism individually, with little to no literature examining how mercantilism to digital globalization cycles informs the current policy dilemmas. The proposed study will fill that gap by putting the prevalent conflicts into the realms of long-term theoretical and historical trends.

Second, the systemic issues generated by WTO dispute systems are not well studied, especially with respect to inequities between the developed and the developing states. Though the advanced economies usually dominate litigation by enjoying better legal resources, smaller economies are constrained by language barriers, compliance costs, and asymmetrical power structures. This paper critiques these institutional deficiencies with a view to finding reform directions. Third, the current literature is usually silent on the possibilities of adapting trade governance to 21st-century realities, such as digital trade, climate-related policies, and supply chain resilience. This paper connects the legal contexts to the new economic dynamics and identifies the opportunities that can be found in the reconciliation of sovereignty and cooperation. Finally, it adds practical knowledge to bring efficiency, equity, and sustainability to global trade.

Research Objectives

1. To discuss the historical context of free trade vs. protectionism and WTO disputes.

2. To highlight the theoretical context of free trade vs. protectionism and WTO disputes.
3. To analyze the laws regarding free trade vs. protectionism and WTO disputes.
4. To identify the key challenges regarding free trade vs. protectionism and WTO disputes.
5. To explore the opportunities for free trade vs. protectionism and WTO disputes.
6. To propose effective prevention and intervention strategies.

Research Methodology

This study employed a systematic review methodology, with research objectives established accordingly. A comprehensive literature review was conducted (Komba & Lwoga, 2020). Research findings were categorized based on their content (Hiver et al., 2021; Petticrew & Roberts, 2006), and classified information was incorporated into the study by organizing it into headings (Gan et al., 2021; Pawson et al., 2005). The evaluation of classified information and titles formed the basis of the study (Page, 2021; Rahi, 2017), ensuring the integrity of the research subject and its contents (Egger et al., 2022; Victor, 2008). The criteria for selection are listed.

1. **Relevance:** Researches that directly addressed the questions posed by this study are included.
2. **Quality:** Studies that meet a certain quality threshold (e.g., methodological rigor, bias risk) are included. Most of the research is from Scopus-indexed and Clarivate Analytics journals and reputed publishers.
3. **Recency:** Consideration of the publication date to ensure that the review reflects the most current evidence. Most of the studies are from the last three years.
4. **Language:** Only studies published in English are included.
5. **Data Completeness:** Previous studies must provide sufficient data on outcomes of interest for practical synthesis; this is also ensured in this research.

This study did not use primary data from human participants; therefore, no ethics clearance letter from the ethics committee was required.

Literature Review

The scholarly debate on free trade versus protectionism presents an essential dilemma of economic efficiency and national sovereignty, and scholars have been

split on the effects they would have in the long run (Ryu, 2025; Tessman, 2022). Whereas classical theories, such as Ricardo's comparative advantage, assume specialization and international interdependence (Ryu & Kim, 2024). Modern literature points to the role of unregulated free trade in increasing the income disparity and de-industrialization of vulnerable economies (Rui-Ke, 2023). This paradox is clearly seen in the developing countries, where they are under pressure to open up markets, yet their immature industries require protectionist measures (Du & Ye, 2023).

The dispute settlement system of the WTO, especially the Dispute Settlement Body (DSB), is a special point of criticism. Its procedures have, in most cases, supported wealthier countries that have more legal resources, even though it was set up to support a rules-based order (Eddy, 2023). As an illustration, third-world nations find it hard to live up to sophisticated technical requirements or endure lengthy court battles, which breed institutional injustices (Mostafiz, 2024). The 2019 crisis of the DSB, which was caused by the U.S. blocking the appointment of Court of Appeals judges, only exposed the weak points in the implementation of rulings, and some states even turned to bilateral agreements (Bethlehem et al., 2022; Raju, 2022).

The revival of protectionism is becoming more and more linked to populist discourses. Studies on the example of Sweden with its nativist protectionism explain how trade barriers are used as a weapon to gain domestic support, often mixing economic policy with identity politics (Dannerhall, 2023). On the contrary, the strategic deployment of exceptions to the WTO by China, e.g., subsidies in state-owned enterprises, reveals how states tend to use legal loopholes to use the discourse of free trade as a pretext to engage in protectionist activities (Du & Ye, 2023). These tactics put the WTO on its heels through its principle of non-discrimination (Tessman, 2022).

New literature looks at the ways in which digital trade and climate politics are upsetting old structures. It has caused regulatory gaps because WTO guidelines on data localization or carbon border taxes do not exist, leading to the need to modernize the institutions (Ryu & Kim, 2024). Meanwhile, the language barriers in settlements of disputes where non-English-speaking countries incur a greater expense of litigation reflect the covert inequities of the global trading regulation (Mostafiz, 2024).

Although the literature has been comprehensive in terms of economic and legal factors, there is scant literature on the ethical impacts of trade sanctions or the impact of non-state actors (e.g., multinational corporations) in policymaking (Rui-Ke, 2023). Also, the overlap of Islamic finance with WTO regulations is not well studied in the context of Muslim-majority economies, although it applies to such countries as Pakistan (Raju, 2022). Future studies might also look into how artificial intelligence would facilitate or reinforce biases in the trade arbitration process (Bethlehem et al., 2022).

Historical Context of Free Trade vs. Protectionism and WTO Disputes

The free trade versus protectionism battle has a long history in the days of mercantilism in the 16th century, during which countries were obsessed with wealth accumulation by means of trade surpluses and colonialism (Tessman, 2022). British industrialization and the Cobden-Chevalier Treaty initiated the transition to free trade in the 19th century, which was of a radically unfamiliar nature compared to the protective tariffs, as offered by the Smoot-Hawley Act, in the U.S., which fueled the Great Depression (Rui-Ke, 2023).

These divergent approaches established enduring patterns in global economic policymaking. Post-WWII, the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) institutionalized multilateral free trade, reflecting a Western-led vision of financial

liberalization (Raju, 2022). Nevertheless, a lot of the newly independent countries, such as Pakistan, used mixed strategies. A mixture of important replacement policies and selective involvement in the world market (Du & Ye, 2023). This period also saw the rise of development economics, which challenged orthodox free trade doctrines by emphasizing structural barriers facing post-colonial economies.

The creation of the WTO in 1995 was a peak of global integration of trade, but it was also a germ of discontent (Ryu & Kim, 2024). The developing countries more and more criticizing the one-size-fits-all approach of the organization, especially in agriculture and intellectual property rights. The Seattle outcry in 1999 and the failure of the Doha Round in 2000 signaled increased opposition to neoliberal trade orthodoxy (Dannerhall, 2023). The 21st century, however, has exacerbated this tension with Brexit, U.S.-China trade wars, and nationalism in supply chains during the pandemic that show how historical protectionist instincts respond to new crises (Ryu, 2025). This historical pendulum of openness and economic sovereignty is being played today with debates over friend-shoring and green protectionism (Tessman, 2022). The continuation of these trends implies that the free trade-protectionism dialectic is enduring in terms of its relevance to the global economy governance process.

Theoretical Context of Free Trade vs. Protectionism and WTO Disputes

Free trade versus protectionism is a heated discussion that is ingrained in competing economic theories that have persisted to influence global governance. Based on classical liberal economics and the concept of comparative advantage, the theory of free trade suggests that open markets will encourage efficiency, innovation, and international interdependence. The minimization of barriers will help the countries specialize in areas in which they have a relative advantage, thus maximizing the total welfare. Much of the philosophy behind multilateral trade institutions is based

on this theoretical framework, in which liberalization is advanced as a source of growth and collaboration.

Conversely, the protectionist theory gives priority to state intervention in order to shield the domestic industries against foreign competition. Protectionism is based on mercantilist theory and the so-called argument of infant industry. It considers tariffs, quotas, and subsidies as tools to obtain economic sovereignty, retain jobs, and guarantee national security. Modern versions broaden this analysis by considering such protectionist interventions as belonging to a cultural identity and political legitimacy, especially in populist or nationalist regimes. The shortcomings of the two paradigms are brought out in the modern debates.

Although efficient, free trade may increase inequality, deindustrialization, and susceptibility in developing economies. Protectionism, although retaining sovereignty, might become a barrier to competitiveness and internationalization. The contemporary discussion thus focuses on hybrid strategies, which combine protectionism in a strategy with liberalism. This changing theoretical environment highlights the conflict between efficiency, equity, and sovereignty in international trade.

Laws Regarding Free Trade vs. Protectionism and WTO Disputes

The World Trade Organization (WTO) laws that control the international trade system strike a balance between free trade and protectionist actions. These statutes control liberalization of trade, protection of local industries, and offer dispute resolution mechanisms.

1. **General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), 1947/1994:** This is the original treaty that fosters the principles of free trade by the rule of non-discrimination, most-favored-nation (MFN) status, and national treatment. It forbids complete irrational hindrances and promotes the same treatment of local and imported goods.
2. **Consent on Safeguards:** In this law, countries are allowed to temporarily restrict (i.e., impose tariffs or quotas) to protect their domestic industries against the sudden surges of imports, allowing industries to adapt without falling apart.

3. **Anti-Dumping Agreement (ADA):** The states have the right to impose duties on foreign products that are sold at unfair market prices. This action will avoid harm to local manufacturers and keep the competition on a fair level.
4. **Agreement on Subsidies and Countervailing Measures (SCM):** It regulates the harmful subsidies and permits countervailing duties to balance the unfair advantages provided to foreign producers.
5. **Dispute Settlement Understanding (DSU):** The WTO Dispute Settlement Understanding is a legal forum used to deal with a conflict between free trade commitments and protectionist policies, but smaller economies usually lack the capacity to litigate effectively.

Challenges for Free Trade vs. Protectionism and WTO Disputes

1. **Historical Background:** The discussion on the issue of free trade and protectionism dates back to the 16th century in terms of mercantilist policies and the formation of the WTO in 1995. Whereas comparative advantage and efficiency are central to free trade, protectionism has been applied in order to protect local industries. This historical conflict still defines the disputes, and developing economies are having issues with openness versus sovereignty.
2. **Legal and Institutional Challenges:** WTO regulations require adherence to the concepts of non-discrimination and transparency. But richer countries tend to take over the resolution of disputes because of their greater legal ability, whereas the developing nations struggle to protect themselves. This crisis in the Dispute Settlement Body (DSB) of 2019 that arose due to blocked appellate appointments revealed the deficiency in applying the rules of trade and left numerous disputes unsolved.
3. **Opportunities and Theoretical Context:** The debate opens up opportunities to reconsider the theoretical frameworks by incorporating sustainable development, digital trade, and fair labor practices into the global trade governance. However, protectionism, populism, and uneven power distribution in geopolitics are obstacles to reforms. The current battle between the domestic industry protectionists and the globalization of the economy highlights the necessity of institutional modernity in the WTO.

Opportunities for Free Trade vs. Protectionism and WTO Disputes

1. **Green and Digital Trade:** New frontiers like climate-related trade and digital commerce can open new opportunities for a state to modernize. The support provided through engagement in these sectors will help in sustainable

development, green innovation, and digital transformation in line with the current trends in the WTO structures.

2. **Industrial Development:** Protectionist policies, which include tariffs and subsidies, give the developing nations a chance to develop infant industries. Protecting them against excessive international competition, local companies get time to modernize, innovate, and increase competitiveness in the long term.
3. **Market Expansion:** Free trade principles provide the possibility of expanding into more markets, product diversification, and cross-border collaborations. New consumer bases are a plus to the businesses, and reduced prices and better quality products are a plus to the consumers.
4. **Strategic Protectionism:** Targeted protectionist measures provide a chance to protect the key industries such as agriculture, energy, and technology. The balance encourages food security, sustainable growth, and sustainability, and allows a progressive entry to the global market.
5. **WTO Dispute Mechanism:** The WTO dispute settlement system provides the smaller economies with an opportunity to contest unfair trade practices. It opens possibilities to have a fair competition, develop the capacity of the institutions, and gain credibility in the international trade market.

Discussion

Free trade and protectionism have remained the debate that characterizes global economic governance, with each facing its own advantages and disadvantages. Supporters of free trade believe that the fewer the barriers, the more efficient the economy, the more innovative, and the more cooperative the international collaboration. Protectionism, on the other hand, aims at protecting the domestic sectors with tariffs, subsidies, and quotas in justification that is likely to be based on national security or national economic sovereignty. This conflict of interest is best seen in the World Trade Organization (WTO), where conflicts are evidence of the constant conflict between liberalization of the economy and protectionism.

These strategies, however, are also very challenging for states, especially developing economies. Free trade may leave weak industries exposed to foreign competition, and protectionism may lead to retaliation and trade wars. Power asymmetries and procedural delays have compromised the credibility of the WTO Dispute Settlement Body (DSB), which provides a platform to settle disputes.

Nevertheless, in spite of these challenges, the debate highlights the need to consider reforms aimed at ensuring global trade balancing between growth, fairness, and sustainability.

Conclusion

The international trade environment is also characterized by the ongoing contradictions between protectionism and the concept of free trade, which pose difficulties that affect fairness, efficiency, and sovereignty. Protectionist measures offer much-needed protection to local sectors, and when over-applied, they might be counterproductive to innovation and international competitiveness. Although free trade is credited with enhancing integration and consumer advantages, there are cases where weak economies are usually exposed to vulnerabilities and unequal benefits. The World Trade Organization is very critical in resolving these battles, but the unequal access and representation demonstrate structural injustices. To maintain an equal balance, institutional changes, enhanced inclusiveness, and dynamic measures to respond to modern-day issues of global economic governance are necessary.

Recommendations

1. **Construct legal capacity:** Train trade officials and legal experts in developing countries on the need to participate more in the WTO dispute procedures.
2. **Enforce environmental policies:** Align trade policies with climate policies through encouraging green subsidies, carbon border adjustments, and environmentally friendly trade policies.
3. **Enhance WTO reforms:** Promote the WTO dispute settlement system reforms so that it becomes more approachable, transparent, and inclusive to developing countries.
4. **Fair competition:** Anti-dumping and countervailing policies should only come in when there is a need to prevent unfair competition, and this should not be in such a way that it does not distort markets.
5. **Foster balanced trade policies:** Establish policies that balance between free trade and protectionist measures to provide protection and growth to the economy and protection to vulnerable industries.

6. **Increase awareness among people:** Conduct awareness programs to create awareness among businesses and citizens on trade rights, opportunities, and dispute mechanisms under the WTO.
7. **Promote ethical leadership in trade:** Advocate fairness, transparency, and sustainability in the long run when policymakers are bargaining over trade agreements and trade disputes.
8. **Promote local industries:** Through some selective subsidies, training, and technology assistance in the infant industries to boost competitiveness without the use of long-term protectionism.
9. **Strengthen digital trade systems:** Work towards an international agreement on e-commerce, localization of data, and digital services within the WTO system to respond to the contemporary trade challenges.
10. **Strengthen regional cooperation:** Promote regional trade agreements that help to supplement WTO principles and provide smaller economies with a higher bargaining power.

Research Limitations

Studies into the issue of protectionism versus the ideals of free trade and WTO disputes have a number of shortcomings. First, it might not be easy to get reliable data on the trade because countries can underreport or falsify data to fit political narratives, making the analysis less accurate. Second, the literature in general is concentrated on major economies with very little empirical research on smaller or developing economies, which limits the generalizability of the results. Third, trade disputes can be highly politically and strategically sensitive, which restricts transparency, with the confidentiality of negotiations and settlement information being inaccessible to researchers.

Also, the rapid shifts of the world community, including the development of digital trade, climate change policies, and geopolitical contradictions, contribute to the fact that it is hard to preserve up-to-date and even timely conclusions since the studies done many years ago could be depreciated in the nearest future. Lastly, diverse opinions in WTO-based scholarship are restricted by language barriers and limited studies and legal knowledge in developing countries. Such constraints underscore the importance of restrained interpretation and provide a call for more

comprehensive, more current, and more localized studies on global trade regulation.

Research Implications

Research Studies of free trade versus protectionism and WTO disputes have a number of implications:

1. **Business strategy:** A deeper insight into the dynamics of trade disputes can assist industries and businesses to adjust their strategies to global competitiveness, especially in new areas of trade such as digital and green trade.
2. **Capacity building:** Literature shows that there is a need to build legal and institutional capacities in developing nations to enable them to be more involved in WTO dispute mechanisms.
3. **Fair trade:** Knowledge can be used to shape changes that will lessen systemic injustices in international trade so that smaller economies have equitable opportunities.
4. **Institutional reform:** Studies point to the necessity to modernize the WTO so that regulations are made to respond to modern forces, including climate policies, technological change, and changing geopolitical realities.
5. **Policy reform:** The results can be used to advise governments on how to formulate trade policies that are liberalization-focused and at the same time protective to guarantee economic growth and national security.

Future Research Directions

Future studies on free trade versus protectionism and WTO disputes might dwell upon several critical areas to resolve the existing challenges and improve the world trade regulation:

1. **Digital and green trade:** How e-commerce regulations, climate policies, and sustainability frameworks contribute to the emergence of new types of trade disputes.
2. **Geopolitical factors:** Understanding how the balance between protectionism and liberalization, as well as changing power structures and regional partnerships, affects WTO negotiations, dispute settlements, and outcomes.
3. **Influence on non-marginalized economies:** Evaluating the effects of global trade regulations on least-developed states and suggesting measures that can be taken to guarantee their fair involvement in international markets.
4. **Protectionism effectiveness:** Research on the role of tariffs, subsidies, and quotas in industrialization and long-term competitiveness in underdeveloped economies.
5. **The WTO dispute settlement reforms:** The efficiency and inclusiveness of the dispute settlement mechanism, including suggestions on how to make it more achievable by smaller and developing countries.

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