

RECONNECT CHINA

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China as an ambivalent supporter of the WTO and the multilateral trading system

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Executive summary

Since launching its reform and opening-up policy, China has viewed participation in international economic institutions such as the IMF and GATT/WTO as a means of advancing its own development objectives. Since joining the WTO in 2001, it has evolved from a discreet observer into an active member, contributing to both rulemaking and dispute settlement. Now, as the multilateral trading system faces attacks from one of its founders, China has officially positioned itself as an active defender.

Yet its stance is more nuanced. On one hand it has supported efforts to preserve the WTO's arbitration function. In pursuing a proactive agenda through bilateral and minilateral agreements, including RCEP, China more broadly seeks to preserve the existing order and is strongly supporting various plurilateral agreements under the WTO. Yet, as Beijing formally advocates reforms to improve the organization's effectiveness, it remains hesitant to adapt its own domestic policies that are not aligned with the liberal logic underlying WTO rules. In other words, China pays lip service to the need to reform the WTO but its actions are not fully in line with its declarations. In parallel, it pursues the creation of alternative governance frameworks such as the Global Governance Initiative (GGI) or the International Organization for Mediation.

Ultimately, China is best understood not as a straightforward status quo power, but as a selectively revisionist one — defending the parts of the system that serve it, while resisting reforms, such as disciplines on subsidies and state intervention, that would touch the core of its economic model.

This creates a mixed picture for the EU. The two sides converge on the priority of restoring the WTO's dispute settlement function but increasingly diverge substantially in a number of areas. Divergences touch on subsidies and the level playing field that include the very definitions of these terms, the unconditionality of most favored nation (MFN) rules, and more broadly on what "reform" itself should mean.

Recommendations

In negotiating efforts to reform the WTO, the EU should:

- Agree on the objective of reform before negotiating specific rules;
- Address definition gaps;
- Ensure that Chinese initiatives such as GGI do not run counter to WTO reform or Europe's broader interests;
- Build coalitions with like-minded partners to gain leverage that bilateral dialogue with China cannot provide alone.

INTRODUCTION

By examining the case of China's engagement in the World Trade Organization (WTO), this policy brief examines Beijing's approach to international trade governance. It seeks to weigh in on whether, from an EU perspective, cooperation with China is possible in reforming and strengthening the existing multilateral trading system. The WTO is the core pillar of the international rules-based trade order today and Brussels has long sought to ensure that whatever trade and economic policies the EU designs remain WTO compatible. Managing trade frictions with China must therefore also incorporate issues related to how Beijing and Brussels view the future of this organization.

The brief starts by describing how China has gradually integrated the multilateral trading system, moving from being a rule taker to becoming a rule maker and a fierce supporter of the régime.

As the system has come under attack by one of its very founders, China emerged as a result as a more proactive player, apparently defending the same principles and values as the EU. But a key question is to determine whether their interests truly converge.

The brief also assesses the validity of the concerns initially expressed by Western partners, including EU member countries, regarding China's potentially revisionist stance.

The last section concludes with recommendations on how to make the best of China's commitment to preserve a well-functioning multilateral trading system going forward.

CHINA'S ACCESSION TO THE WTO

A gradual process

During the Maoist period, China had kept its distance from multilateral economic institutions, and it would only begin to move closer towards the end of the 1970s, in parallel with the policy of reform and opening up launched by Deng Xiaoping. Scholars largely agree that China initially joined multilateral international organizations to support its domestic development goals.¹

While the Republic of China was one of the 23 signatory countries of the GATT in 1947, Chiang Kai-shek's government decided to withdraw from the institution in

1950 following the takeover of the country by Mao's Communist Party. The Republic of China was granted observer status in 1965, a status it lost in 1971 when the People's Republic of China (PRC) took over China's seat at the UN. For its part, the PRC lost interest in GATT, preoccupied as it was with establishing its newly won power.

At the end of the 1970s, however, the leaders of the PRC sought to move closer to the GATT: the PRC took part in the negotiations on the Multifiber Agreement, of which it became a member in 1983, obtained permanent observer status with the GATT in 1984 and submitted an official request to the GATT Director-General in 1986 "to regain its status as a contracting party to the Agreement", in the name of the principle of the continuity of the Chinese state.² The events of Tiananmen Square in 1989 naturally put a stop to this rapprochement.

The momentum was revived in 1992 in the wake of the second wave of reforms: discussions on the "reintegration of China into the GATT" resumed, while Taiwan had applied in January 1990 as a separate customs territory.³ Despite intensive efforts on the part of Beijing, however, China failed in finalizing its accession to the GATT before the end of the Uruguay Round of negotiations (1986-94).

The WTO was established on 1 January 1995, and China started to negotiate its entry into the organization. After more than a decade of preparation, China became the 143rd member of the WTO on 11 December 2001. As a "separate customs territory of Taiwan, Penghu, Kinmen and Matsu", Taiwan became a member of the WTO in January of the following year.⁴

A winning strategy

When China joined the WTO, expectations in Beijing were exceptionally high, but so were concerns. Some anticipated that WTO accession would strengthen China, while others feared that the costs of adjustment might exceed the benefits. Twenty-five years later, there is little doubt that the optimists were right: China has clearly gained from integration into the open and stable multilateral trading system, becoming one of its principal beneficiaries.⁵

Above all, alignment with internationally recognized standards helped strengthen confidence in China and

made the country more attractive to foreign investors. WTO accession also expanded China's trade with the rest of the world, enabled its leaders to advance domestic reforms, and strengthened the competitiveness of its economy. These gains came after more than twenty years of preparation and required substantial efforts in the form of major structural reforms. While Chinese leaders deemed such reform to be necessary, its implementation was ultimately made easier by external pressure.⁶ Indeed, even in an authoritarian system such as China's, policy choices can be shaped by debates among competing views.

CHINA IN THE WTO

From a silent observer to an active supporter

Initially, China remained relatively passive in multilateral trade negotiations, including during the Doha Round (2001–2006), and rarely appeared able to put forward its own proposals. In this respect, it differed from other BRICS members, particularly Brazil and India, which have generally adopted a more assertive approach in such negotiations.⁷

Several factors may explain this posture. First, as “the new kid on the block”, China did not yet master all the complexities, nuances and inner workings of the institution. Moreover, after nearly 15 years of discussions leading up to its entry into the WTO, China had played almost all its cards and was therefore no longer able to make any further concessions. Finally, more generally, the absence of specific legal expertise or traditions in China undoubtedly explains the differences in posture and strategy compared to India, for example.⁸ China's decision-making process favors power relations and bilateral discussions rather than internationally accepted legal procedures, which may explain China's relative passivity within the WTO.

On the other hand, China's relative passivity also means that it was not a brake or a source of blockage in multilateral trade negotiations either. For example, China did not stand together with the other BRICS during the demonstrations that led to the failure of the Cancun summit in 2003.⁹ Similarly, during the WTO ministerial conference held in Bali in December 2003, China did not support India's hardline position on subsidies and food security, which failed to derail the negotiations.¹⁰

Over time, China's active and positive contribution to the WTO has become more conspicuous.¹¹

First, China's WTO membership has contributed to making the WTO a relevant and truly global organization.

Second, China has taken an active part in key aspects of the WTO since its accession. Regarding the WTO negotiation function for instance, China proved to be an important contributor to the successful conclusion of the Trade Facilitation Agreement (TFA) in 2013. It was the 16th WTO member to ratify the agreement in 2015.

Third, China has taken an active part in various development assistance and aid-for-trade programs of the WTO.

Lastly, the fact that a Chinese representative, Yi Xiaozhun¹², has recently taken up the post of Deputy Director-General of the WTO¹³ can also be interpreted as a willingness on the part of China to support the multilateral framework and to participate actively in global governance.

China and the WTO's dispute settlement mechanism

In addition to multilateral trade negotiations, the second major mission of the WTO is to provide its member states with a framework within which to resolve any disputes that may arise between them. This framework is constituted by the institution's dispute settlement mechanism (DSM). China's relationship with the DSM has evolved considerably since its accession, but the country's engagement with dispute settlement offers a compelling indication of its commitment to, and support for, the WTO.

Regarding the WTO judicial function, China has seriously implemented WTO dispute rulings. In the very first years after its accession to the WTO, China tended to avoid recourse to the DSM and to bow quickly to the pressure of its partners (American or European in particular). In 2004, for example, it took less than four months for the United States to make China bend over a question of VAT rebates on integrated circuits.¹⁴

As China became more familiar with these mechanisms, it first joined complaints brought by other members before making more systematic use of the DSM itself. Between August 2003 and 2006, China participated as a third party in almost every panel established during the

period as a third party, reflecting a period of institutional learning. Through its participation as a third party, China gained invaluable understanding of the WTO dispute settlement system and boosted its confidence in participating in the system as a main party.¹⁵

Over time China has become increasingly skillful in using the DSM and WTO rules to advance its legitimate interests.

The turning point came in 2008, when China challenged the United States by requesting consultations over definitive anti-dumping and countervailing duties. The case went to appeal, lasted more than two years, and ultimately resulted in a DSM ruling in China's favor.

Since joining the WTO, China has participated in high-profile disputes through the DSM. It has been involved in 35 disputes as a complainant, 53 as a respondent and 198 as a third party.¹⁶

China has more frequently been brought to the WTO DSM than any other WTO members in the last two decades. Cases against China were brought primarily by the United States and the EU (in that order). Similarly, cases in which China was a complainant were primarily against the US and the EU (and more recently India).

China is now perfectly integrated into the mechanisms for the governance of international trade. In a nutshell, China has evolved from being a silent observer to a sophisticated participant in the DSM.

CHINA'S MULTI-PRONGED DEFENSE OF TRADE MULTILATERALISM

As the United States moves further away from the liberal international order it helped build after the Second World War, China has increasingly presented itself as one of that order's staunch defenders.

This is unsurprising: having benefited greatly from the existing system, China has little reason to seek its overthrow. Preserving a robust WTO-centered multilateral trading order serves its economic, trade and strategic interests. China is therefore best understood as a status quo power when it comes to trade, even if its support of the existing order can take different forms. China may be better described as a reform-minded status quo power.¹⁷

Making the WTO more effective

First, China supports innovative WTO rulemaking, promoting flexible alternatives for developing trade norms when formal, consensus-based negotiations are blocked.

Out of pragmatism, China is in favor of plurilateral initiatives which, unlike multilateral agreements, are binding only on those members that have accepted them. China considers such agreements as "a middle way between the poles of moving all together and not moving at all [that] will help WTO deliver more for its members".¹⁸

For instance, China was a driving force behind the negotiation of the Investment Facilitation for Development (IFD) agreement, that was successfully concluded in July 2023.¹⁹ Championed by China, the IFD is a plurilateral agreement based on most favored nation (MFN) treatment, open to all WTO members. At the time of writing, it has attracted 131 WTO members, accounting for three quarters of WTO membership.

Secondly, China recently took some steps meant to enhance the WTO's effectiveness. At the 2025 United Nations General Assembly, China signaled that it would continue to consider itself a developing country²⁰ but would not avail itself of Special and Differential treatment (S&DT) for any ongoing or future negotiation. Although it is not clear how that promise will be enforced, this decision reflects China's greater willingness to assume responsibilities commensurate with its economic weight. It is presented by Beijing as proof of its sense of responsibility and as a way of meeting external expectations.

Actually, this move is (relatively) cost-free to China for now, since it has already given up S&DT privileges in recent talks, simply because it does not need them. In terms of legal rights and obligations, the implications of Beijing's renunciation are modest if not negligible,²¹ but the gesture is symbolic and such an announcement does matter in politics. Also, the decision will help defuse criticisms that China unfairly exploits its developing country status.

The timing of China's move can be easily explained by the Trump factor. As the US often sought to deny China the privileges that come with the developing country status,

China decided to remove that argument from the equation.

Pushing alternative mechanisms

Over time, with the WTO gradually losing relevance, countries are increasingly seeking to develop alternative rulemaking mechanisms on trade. And China supports such instruments.

In an attempt to signal to the world that unlike the US, which has moved to block the DSM and more broadly undermine the WTO, Beijing aims to play a constructive and stabilizing role in the global trade regime. China, despite its aversion to international courts and tribunals,²² has joined the Multi Party Interim Appeal Arbitration Agreement (MPIAA) set up in March 2020. As an alternative system for resolving WTO disputes, the MPIAA is in effect standing in for the WTO Appellate Body. It has currently 34 members, including the EU as a bloc and China, and provides a functioning dispute settlement amongst its parties.

China and WTO reform

The collapse of the WTO's negotiating function has to do with the constraints imposed by the necessity of reaching consensus and with the "single undertaking" principle, meaning that "nothing is agreed until everything is agreed". But another issue relates to the limited adaptability of the WTO rulebook. In its current form, the WTO does not address all the issues arising from new trading conditions. In particular, the organization's chronic inability to update existing rules and develop new rules shifts to rulemaking outside the WTO and reduces its relevance.

Also, from China's perspective, changes to the system that would give more space and influence to the developing world (the so-called Global South) are considered to be long overdue.

As a staunch supporter and active contributor to the multilateral trading system, China submitted its proposal on WTO reform as early as 2019.²³

In a recent position paper on WTO reform issued on February 18, 2026,²⁴ China calls the WTO "an important pillar of multilateralism and a key institution for international economic governance."

It further stresses the value of the WTO: "despite heightened trade tensions and unprecedented uncertainties, WTO rules and institutions still serve as a crucial bulwark against trade turbulence and an anchor for the stability and predictability of international trade."

Still, China's position is ambivalent. On the one hand, as explained above, it has taken several moves signaling its good will, but on the other hand it is reluctant to significantly adjust its policies in order to comply more fully with WTO principles. In other words, China is not simply looking to rigidly adhere to this system.

China's WTO reform proposal may not fully align with that of the EU. China stresses the need to preserve the MFN principle (this can be interpreted as a veiled criticism of the US unilateral approach), while the EU has recently moved on this specific point. In particular, the MFN requires non-discriminatory treatment of all members, but as the trade deficit with China grows exponentially and reciprocal market access becomes an issue, Brussels is increasingly questioning the unconditional observance of the principle, allowing space for country-specific tariffs or other barriers in the absence of reciprocity.²⁵

More importantly, in its position paper China refuses to address level playing field issues that are deemed to be major stumbling blocks from an EU perspective. Far to the contrary it insists on the need to "respect members' distinct economic systems and development stages". The snag is that the Chinese economic system, which relies on heavy state interventionism, is incompatible with the liberal logic underlying WTO rules.²⁶ Industrial policies have contributed significantly to China's current account surplus, but more importantly they have been instrumental in helping China develop and maintain strong competitive advantage in many sectors.

Without a doubt Chinese authorities see value in maintaining the status quo (in particular non-discrimination rules and binding dispute settlement) and support modest reform, including through participation in open plurilateral agreements that are consistent with China's overall trade strategy.²⁷

CHINA'S GLOBAL GOVERNANCE INITIATIVE AND OTHER PROPOSALS

China's rise tends to exacerbate the diminishing centrality of WTO law for global trade governance. And China is increasingly taking advantage of its growing economic clout to push different initiatives that best suit its own economic interests.

China's Global Governance Initiative (GGI) was officially put forward by President Xi Jinping at the Shanghai Cooperation Organization Plus Meeting in early September 2025. Aimed at promoting the reform and improvement of the global governance system, it is presented as another public good that China contributes to the world.²⁸

While the jury is still out on how this initiative will materialize, a key question is to determine whether the GGI is compatible with the existing order or is an attempt to design a new China-centered order.

As explained earlier, China holds a positive attitude towards open plurilateral approaches to update the multilateral trade rules, but Beijing also believes that in new areas such as digital economy and artificial intelligence, the WTO members need to fill the gap between the reality and the WTO rule book.

It has recently launched different initiatives such as the World Artificial Intelligence Cooperation Organization (WAICO), the establishment of which was proposed in July 2025 during China's flagship annual AI event. While few official details have been released about the goals of the initiative, it reflects continuity in China's approach to international governance and formalizes Chinese attempts to raise its profile and shape international AI policy developments.

Another Chinese initiative is also worth mentioning: In 2025 China was instrumental in setting up the International Organization for Mediation, headquartered in Hong Kong with 33 founding members. Its advertised remit is to mediate international political and economic disputes and enhance the Global South's representation in international legal systems.

WHICH WAY FORWARD FOR THE EU?

As long-standing frictions with Beijing on economic policy mount, the EU has found itself on the eve of a trade war with China, as the European economy increasingly absorbs the shock of the country's surplus production and Beijing's leveraging of Europe's critical supply chain

dependencies. Yet as the EU seeks to preserve the rules-based trade order in the face of Washington's full-blown trade offensive, China would appear to be an ally of sorts. Striking the right balance is proving increasingly fraught. Indeed, the EU needs to maintain a dialogue with China to explore the extent of its readiness to tackle core reform priorities, but this is not proving to be an easy task.

Where interests converge — and where they don't

With respect to WTO reform, the two partners converge on the priority to be given to reforming the dispute settlement mechanism: both Brussels and Beijing have an interest in restoring a functioning DSM and Appellate Body.

On most other issues, however, convergence is far more debatable, if not circumspect. China pays lip service to reforming the WTO and presents itself, *prima facie*, as a staunch defender of the institution and its rules, but it increasingly appears bent on reshaping those rules to fit its own interests rather than genuinely opening its economy to their logic.

Three points of friction stand out. First, the two sides disagree on MFN: China remains a staunch defender of the principle, even as the EU has begun to question its unconditional application, particularly with respect to China. Second, they diverge sharply on how to define subsidies, state support, and the level playing field more broadly; China's position paper resists addressing these issues directly, instead calling for reform to "respect members' distinct economic systems and development stages" — language that, from an EU perspective, functions less as an invitation to converge than as a request to leave the core problem untouched. Third, and more fundamentally, the two sides often use the same vocabulary — "reform," "fairness," "development" — to mean different things, making it difficult to tell whether an apparent point of agreement is real or illusory.

This is why China's posture is best understood less as that of a straightforward status quo power and more as a selectively revisionist one when it comes to trade. China's distinctive economic structure makes certain legal issues difficult to define, let alone resolve, under WTO rules: the state — and, more precisely, the Party — continues to play a substantial role in the economy, and Beijing regards the preservation of state and Party intervention as

essential to the competitiveness of its economic model.²⁹ China is not seeking to overturn the WTO system outright; it is seeking to reshape it in ways that better accommodate its own model, while leaving intact the parts of the system — MFN, binding dispute settlement, open plurilateral agreements — that continue to serve its interests.

It is also worth noting what this brief has largely set aside: the growing use of national-security exceptions and export controls by all major players, and particularly China, which increasingly operate outside the WTO's rules-based framework altogether. This dimension is closely related to the reform debate discussed here — and arguably just as consequential — but it raises distinct questions that merit separate treatment.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Given this mixed picture, EU strategy toward China on WTO reform should rest on three pillars.

First, agree on the objective of WTO reform. Before negotiating specific rules, the EU needs a clear-eyed answer to what reform is meant to achieve — a more effective negotiating and dispute-settlement function, or a rebalancing of the substantive rules governing subsidies and state intervention. China has an interest in the former without the latter; the EU cannot accept a reform agenda that stops there.

Second, address the definition gaps. Much of the current impasse stems from the two sides using the same terms to mean different things. The EU should press for reform discussions that begin by defining shared vocabulary — on subsidies, on state support, on the level playing field —

rather than assuming agreement where none exists.

Third, ensure that Chinese initiatives do not run counter to WTO reform or Europe's broader interests. As Beijing increasingly promotes alternative platforms and initiatives — the Global Governance Initiative (GGI) foremost among them, alongside ventures like the International Organization for Mediation — the EU should watch closely whether these efforts reinforce the existing multilateral order or gradually substitute for it on terms more favorable to China. Brussels and European capitals should be prepared to engage or push back when necessary.

Fourth, the EU should seek the support of like-minded partners to exert pressure on China. Bilateral EU-China dialogue alone is unlikely to shift Beijing's core positions. Building coalitions with other WTO members who share the EU's concerns — on subsidies, industrial policy, and the erosion of MFN's usefulness in an unbalanced trading relationship — gives Brussels more leverage than it can generate alone, while also helping to preserve, rather than fragment, the multilateral character of the system it is trying to defend.

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ENDNOTES

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