

# WTO Ministerial Conferences

The Ministerial Conference, the WTO's highest decision-making entity, convenes typically every two years. It puts together all of the WTO's members, which are either nations or customs unions. All decisions pertaining to any of the multilateral trade agreements must be made by the Ministerial Conference.

The topic has a very high chance of being asked as a UPSC Prelims Economics Question or as a Current Affairs Question as it has been in the news recently.

## About WTO Ministerial Conferences

The World Trade Organization's highest competent authority is the Ministerial Conference (WTO). From 1996 until 2022, there were twelve ministerial conferences, which were typically held every two years. Below are some brief details about all such twelve conferences held so far:

### First Ministerial Conference

In 1996, Singapore hosted the first ministerial meeting. Its main goal was to launch a worldwide initiative among trading nations to reform the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT structure)'s and operating procedures while retaining the system's significant achievements and achievements since its founding in 1948. Four problems raised during this meeting that later came to be known as the "Singapore issues" gave rise to disagreements, mostly between industrialised and developing economies.

Delegates reviewed the performance of the rules based multilateral trading system, discussed implementation-related issues, and decided on the future direction of the WTO's operations during the first Ministerial Conference of the World Trade Organization (WTO), which did meet in Singapore from December 9 to 13, 1996. The finalisation of the Information Technology Agreement (ITA) as well as the implementation of the Comprehensive and Integrated Plan of Action, both of which are intended to help the least developed nations access and benefit from the multilateral trading system, were accomplishments of the first Ministerial Conference. Core labour standards, investments and competition policies, and, to a smaller extent, public procurement and the execution of accords on agriculture and textiles, were all the subject of extensive discussion. To investigate the connections between trade and the fields of investment, competition policy, and public procurement, new working groups were formed. A permanent WTO body, the Committee on Trade and Environment, was also established.

### Second Ministerial Conference

Between May 18 and 20, 1998, Geneva, Switzerland hosted the 2nd WTO Ministerial Conference. The 2nd Ministerial Conference of the WTO (18-20 May 1998) in Geneva had the most significant result in that the Ministers, through their own main Declaration, provided their WTO Ambassadors with the opportunity to get ready for more substantial bargaining in the following 18 months that resulted in further liberalisation and the pushing of new issues onto the WTO. This outcome was in line with the Northern nations' strategy, which was driving the liberalisation push. However, due to popular demonstrations against the WTO, free trade, and globalisation, the 50th anniversary celebrations and the private meetings were held under siege-like circumstances. The demonstrations were a reflection of

the mounting anxiety and rage among social movements, NGOs, and the general people worldwide against the unstable and frequently negative effects of globalisation and liberalisation.

The fierce competition between huge corporations and between countries in the great race of globalisation had resulted in growing social and job instability even in the rich nations, which have contributed to increased popular opposition to the WTO in the North. In the next 12 months leading up to the next Ministerial, developing nations came under intense pressure to agree to additional measures in the review of existing WTO agreements and to begin negotiations on new topics like investment, competition policy, public procurement, and electronic commerce.

### **Third Ministerial Conference**

Between November 30 and December 3, 1999, Seattle, Washington State, USA hosted the 3rd WTO Ministerial Conference. The conference's main objective was to make a resolution regarding the start of the so-called "New Rounds," which would be the subsequent round of discussions to the Uruguay Round, as well as a decision regarding the parameters and procedures of the new round. The four-day meeting came to an impasse. In addition, the Ministerial Declaration was not made and the start of the new round was suspended. The decision was made to pause the conversation and pick it back up later. Massive protests and attempts by the police and National Guard to control the crowds resulted in failure, gaining attention on a global scale.

### **Fourth Ministerial Conference**

The Fourth Ministerial Conference in Doha, Qatar, declared in November 2001 that negotiations on a variety of topics and other tasks, such as concerns about the execution of the current accords, were to proceed. The Trade Negotiations Committee and its affiliates are where the negotiations are held. In other WTO councils and committees, additional work under the work programme is done. The Doha Development Agenda (DDA) includes provisions for access to non-agricultural markets (NAMA), services, dispute resolution, anti-dumping duties, and subsidies. China, who joined as the 143rd member, was also given the approval to join by the conference.

#### ***Doha Round***

The Doha Development Agenda (DDA), often known as the Doha Round, was introduced by the WTO at the 4th Ministerial Conference in Doha, Qatar, in November 2001. The Doha round was intended to be an ambitious attempt to broaden globalisation and aid the world's poor, especially by reducing restrictions and subsidies in agriculture. The first agenda included both new rule-making and trade liberalisation, and it was supported by pledges to increase significant aid to developing nations. Despite the heated discussions at multiple Ministerial Conferences and other sessions, an agreement has not been achieved in the very acrimonious negotiations. Disagreements persist to this day about a number of important topics, including agriculture subsidies.

### **Fifth Ministerial Conference**

From September 10 to 14, 2003, Cancun, Mexico hosted the 5th WTO Ministerial Conference. The major goal was to evaluate the state of the discussions and other activities related to the Doha Development Agenda. It accepted Cambodia and Nepal as the WTO's first newly admitted least-developed nations since the organization's founding. The ministerial meeting's goal was to reach a deal on the Doha round. The G20, an association of 22 nations from the South led by India, China, and

Brazil, rejected requests from the North for accords on the so-called "Singapore issues" and demanded an end to agricultural subsidies in the US and EU. Without making headway, the negotiations ended.

### **Sixth Ministerial Conference**

From December 13 to December 18, 2005, Hong Kong hosted the 6th WTO Conference Ministerial. If the four year old Doha Development Agenda talks were to advance far enough to end the round in 2006, it was deemed essential. At this summit, nations decided to phase out all export subsidies for agriculture by the end of 2013 and to stop export subsidies for cotton by the end of 2006. An agreement to offer duty-free, tariff-free accessibility for products from the Developing Economies, in line with the European Union's Anything But Arms policy, was one of the further concessions made to developing nations. However, only up to three per cent of tariff lines would be exempt. By the end of 2006, more negotiations on other significant issues were scheduled to end.

### **Seventh Ministerial Conference**

From 30th November to 2nd December 2009, Geneva, Switzerland, hosted the WTO Ministerial Conference's 7th Session. "The WTO, the Multilateral Trading System, and the Current Global Economic Environment" was the overarching theme of discussion. Instead of serving as a Doha Round negotiation session, as was the case with past Conferences, this gathering was designed to give Ministers an opportunity to reflect on all aspects of their work, share ideas, and offer to advise on the best course of action moving forward.

### **Eighth Ministerial Conference**

From December 15th to December 17th, 2011, Geneva, Switzerland, hosted the 8th ministerial conference. Three working sessions with the topics of "Importance of the Multilateral Trading System and the WTO," "Trade and Development," and "Doha Development Agenda" was held concurrently with the Plenary Session, wherein Ministers delivered prepared remarks. The Conference gave its approval for Montenegro, Samoa, and Russia to join. Ministers endorsed a number of resolutions during the closing session, and the chair gave a final speech.

### **Ninth Ministerial Conference**

The "Bali Package," a set of decisions intended at streamlining trade, giving developing nations more choices for ensuring food security, enhancing trade with least-developed nations, and generally assisting development, was adopted by ministers at the 9th Ministerial Conference, hosted in Bali, Indonesia, from 3rd to 7th December 2013. In addition, they approved a series of more routine measures and also welcomed Yemen as a new WTO member. The Bali Package, which lowers trade restrictions, was approved by 159 members of the World Trade Organization. The cornerstone of the Bali Package was a fresh trade facilitation agreements designed to reduce bureaucracy and streamline customs processes to minimise the cost of doing business. The pact also included other, less significant parts that dealt with food security and a number of topics that were particularly important to LDCs, like trade preferences and cotton subsidies.

### **Tenth Ministerial Conference**

From December 15 to 19, 2015, Nairobi, Kenya, hosted the 10th Ministerial Conference of the World Trade Organization. It culminated in the passage of the "Nairobi Package," a collection of 6 Ministerial Decisions on matters pertaining to least-developed nations, cotton, and agriculture (LDCs). Among them is a promise to end export incentives for agricultural exports. The other agricultural choices deal

with public stockholding for the purpose of food security, a unique safeguard system for developing nations, and cotton-related regulations. The criteria for assessing whether LDC exports qualify for trade preferences and the preferential treatment for least developed countries (LDCs) in the services sector were also decided. Amina Mohamed, Kenya's Cabinet Secretary of Foreign Affairs and International Trade served as the conference's chairman. On the agenda was the conclusion of Afghanistan and Liberia's WTO membership.

## Eleventh Ministerial Conference

From December 10 to December 13, 2017, Buenos Aires, Argentina, hosted the 11th Ministerial Conference. Minister Susana Malcorra of Argentina served as its chairperson. In addition to a pledge to continue talks in all areas, the Conference concluded with a series of ministerial decisions, including ones on e-commerce duties and fisheries subsidies. About 4,000 delegates, comprising Ministers, senior government officials, representatives from the 164 member countries of the organisation, WTO observers, and representatives from the media, corporate, and civil society, attended.

## Twelfth Ministerial Conference

From June 12 to June 17, 2022, the WTO's twelfth Ministerial Conference was held in Geneva. Ministers from all over the world were present to examine how the multilateral trading system was operating, make general remarks, and decide how the WTO should proceed with its future activities. Kazakhstan co-hosted the conference. The second Ministerial Conference was originally slated to take place in Kazakhstan in June 2020, but the COVID-19 outbreak forced a postponement. On June 17, the meeting came to a triumphant conclusion with an agreement on a number of significant trade proposals.

### *Important Decisions of Twelfth WTO Ministerial Conference*

#### **Curtailing Harmful Subsidies in the Fisheries Sector**

To better conserve global fish stocks, the WTO approved a multilateral deal that will stop "harmful" subsidies on illicit, unreported and unorganized fishing for the next 4 years. Member countries have been discussing the prohibition of subsidies that encourage overfishing since 2001. In this accord, India and some other developing nations were able to secure some concessions. They were successful in getting a provision of the proposal dropped that threatened some subsidies that supported artisanal small-scale fishing.

#### **Global Food Security**

The World Food Programme (WFP) of the UN was authorised to purchase food for humanitarian purposes without being subject to export restrictions. Members of the WTO agreed that this resolution was binding. To fulfil domestic food security demands, countries would be permitted to impose restrictions on food supplies. The next Ministerial Conference in 2023 is expected to address India's main demand, which is for permission to export food out of its public stockholdings to foreign nations.

#### **E-commerce Transactions**

Until the next Ministerial Conference or till March 31, 2024, whichever arrives earliest, all members decided to extend the long-standing ban on customs duties on electronic commerce transmissions. In 1998, when the internet was still fairly new, WTO members initially agreed to refrain from levying customs taxes on electronic transmissions. Since then, the moratorium has indeed been repeatedly extended. India has requested that the WTO review the extension of the ban on customs charges for



transactions involving goods and services that are traded digitally. From 2017 to 2020, only 49 digital products represented a \$50 billion loss in potential tariff revenue for developing nations.

### COVID-19 Vaccine

In order to facilitate easier local production of Covid-19 vaccines, WTO members decided to temporarily forego intellectual property patents on certain products without the approval of the patent owners for a period of five years. The initial proposal put forth by South Africa and India in 2020 has been modified to create the current accord. They want larger waivers of intellectual property restrictions for vaccines, medications, and testing. As it does not sufficiently waive IP on all necessary COVID-19 medical instruments and does not extend to all nations, this agreement falls short of providing an overall meaningful and effective way to help expand people's access to critical medical instruments during the pandemic.

## Various WTO Ministerial Conferences

Ministerial Conference	Date	Host
1	9th to 13th December 1996	Singapore
2	18th to 20th May 1998	Geneva, Switzerland
3	30th November to 3rd December 1999	Seattle, United States
4	9th 14th November 2001	Doha, Qatar
5	10th to 14th September 2003	Cancún, Mexico
6	13th 18th December 2005	Hong Kong
7	30th November to 2nd December 2009	Geneva, Switzerland
8	15th 17th December 2011	Geneva, Switzerland
9	3rd to 6th December 2013	Bali, Indonesia
10	15th to 18th December 2015	Nairobi, Kenya
11	10th to 13th December 2017	Buenos Aires, Argentina
12	12th to 16th June 2022	Geneva, Switzerland

## GATT and WTO Trade Rounds

Name	Start Date	Countries	Subjects Covered	Achievements
Geneva	April 1947	23	Tariffs	Signing of GATT, 45,000 tariff concessions affecting \$10 billion of trade

Annecy	April 1949	34	Tariffs	Countries exchanged some 5,000 tariff concessions
Torquay	September 1950	34	Tariffs	Countries exchanged some 8,700 tariff concessions, cutting the 1948 tariff levels by 25%
Geneva	January 1956	22	Tariffs, admission of Japan	\$2.5 billion in tariff reductions
Dillon	September 1960	45	Tariffs	Tariff concessions worth \$4.9 billion of world trade
Kennedy	May 1964	48	Tariffs, anti-dumping	Tariff concessions worth \$40 billion of world trade
Tokyo	September 1973	102	Tariffs, non-tariff measures, "framework" agreements	Tariff reductions worth more than \$300 billion achieved
Uruguay	September 1986	123	Tariffs, non-tariff measures, rules, services, intellectual property, dispute settlement, textiles, agriculture, creation of WTO, etc.	The round led to the creation of WTO, and extended the range of trade negotiations, leading to major reductions in tariffs (about 40%) and agricultural subsidies, an agreement to allow full access to textiles and clothing from developing countries, and an extension of intellectual property rights.
Doha	November 2001	159	Tariffs, non-tariff measures, agriculture, labour standards, environment, competition, investment, transparency, patents etc.	The round has not yet concluded. The last agreement to date, the Bali Package, was signed on 7 December 2013.