

Inside the WTO, a global trade body on the precipice

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JANE KELSEY. Newsroom 7 April 2026

As the WTO faces questions about its relevance following yet another disappointing ministerial conference, Jane Kelsey shares her impressions from the ground in Cameroon.

Comment: Two decades ago, the biennial ministerial conference of the World Trade Organisation would have made headlines as pundits proclaimed how crucial its global trade rules were to New Zealand's wellbeing.

Last week's 14th WTO ministerial meeting in Yaoundé, Cameroon passed with nary a mention. True, the international news space is currently crowded. But that resounding silence also reflects the turmoil confronting the 30-year-old institution, and the questionable relevance and authority of its multilateral trade regime in today's world.

The chaos surrounding the Yaoundé meeting symbolised its existential crisis. A week before, there was still speculation the conference would be called off as flights were rescheduled due to the war and the unfinished state of the venue. Getting there from New Zealand took me 48 hours!

Incredibly helpful local staff tried to steer us through a chaotic arrivals hall and lost baggage, erratic shuttle bus schedules and blocked toilets – the realities of a low-income country hosting a global conference with 166 government delegations, media contingents and accredited “civil society” representatives from business, trade unions and trade justice non-government organisations. Aptly, a massive storm on the final day saw the lights go out on the conference as it was grinding to a close with no agreed outcome.

National interest and multilateralism have always been uncomfortable bedfellows, and the United States as its most powerful state has always driven the institution. But the illusion that all member states are equal has been central to the WTO's narrative. It was embraced by African states as they hosted only the second ministerial conference on the continent.

On the final day of the conference, I was part of a panel on Cameroon's public television that discussed whether the conference offered hope to Africa. The two local participants, a prominent economist and a former diplomat and development scholar, explained the baselines for Africa's development: industrialisation and

technology transfer so it can develop and profit from resources that are currently shipped offshore; agricultural rules that permit it to ensure food security and survival of small farmers; and collective sub-regional and regional integration that reduces dependence on others and vulnerability to their power plays. A prominent Indian analyst and former negotiator echoed those concerns in relation to Asia.

None of this was on the conference agenda. Instead, the US demanded capitulation by all other members. But it overplayed its hand, producing a stalemate and no outcomes. The crunch was its insistence, on behalf of Big Tech, that an existing moratorium on border taxes for digital transmissions was made permanent. Brazil wanted it dropped altogether to protect the digital sovereignty and policy space of developing countries. There was no middle ground. Brazil, reportedly on instructions from President Lula, refused to go beyond two years, followed by a review and the right to opt out. Türkiye supported Brazil.

India held its ground against the normalisation of plurilateral agreements, which it insists would undermine the fundamentally multilateral nature of the WTO system at the expense of the Global South.

Washington's refusal to allow references to past ministerial mandates on agriculture added fuel to the fire. Meanwhile, the paralysis of the WTO's dispute system through the US's refusal to agree to new appellate body appointments was barely mentioned over the four days.

US power plays are nothing new. I've been to a majority of WTO ministerial conferences. The first was in Brussels in 1990, midway through the Uruguay Round negotiations that established the WTO. The US successfully demanded new global rules on issues of intellectual property rights and services that had no, or minimal, links to real trade, while protecting the US and European Union's massive subsidies to agriculture.

The US was also explicit that the new Organisation and its binding dispute body would not be permitted to impinge on American sovereignty – while insisting all other countries would be subject to enforceable rules. Over the years the US has rejected adverse rulings, most vigorously those finding it has abused the “national security” exception, progressively paralysing the dispute system and creating a lack of accountability for breaching its rules.

Other US grievances emerged over time. China entered the WTO in 2001 on terms largely dictated by America, which expected access to China's markets while continuing to dominate the global economy. When the reverse became evident, the US said China was breaking the rules which must be rewritten to “level the playing field”.

An institution on the precipice

When developing countries sought to rebalance the lopsided results of the Uruguay Round, as the WTO promised in 1995, the US and others sank the Doha “development” round. Instead, they demanded fresh rules to meet their new commercial interests, such as hands-off regulation and no border taxes for Big Tech. When developing countries insisted their priorities were resolved first, “like-minded”

WTO subgroups of members, including New Zealand, developed agreements on a plurilateral basis.

This incremental white-anting of the WTO became open combat under Trump through unilateral tariffs, usurious “reciprocal” trade agreements, and defining every rule-breaking action as a matter of national or economic security. In the lead-up to the 2026 ministerial conference, the US declared the “current global order in international trade, overseen by the WTO” was “untenable and unsustainable”. Either it would be radically remade to restore US supremacy, or be condemned to irrelevance.

Washington is the most aggressive demander, but it is not alone. The EU was also belligerent. Its own demands for reform, which it claimed were essential to make the multilateral system relevant today, were remarkably similar to the US. “Friends of the System”, including New Zealand, went along, while the WTO director-general and her secretariat facilitated the process.

Any illusion that the WTO’s 166 member states are equal was brutally stripped away. The Norwegian ambassador who had controversially prepared the ground for the ministerial back in Geneva bluntly told a select group of countries in an invitation-only “green room” on the first night that “not all members are equal – some are more equal than others”, before calling on the US, EU, India and China to speak. Even the director-general intervened to contradict him!

But that reality was obvious to all. A majority of developing countries were sidelined. What the director-general called a “nimble and smoother process” centred on informal break-out sessions addressing key areas of reform. Members had still not seen the summary reports by minister-facilitators, all from pro-reform countries including New Zealand, when the meeting concluded – let alone been able to correct them. Yet these are meant to provide “context” for renewed discussions on “reform” back in Geneva.

Meanwhile, registered NGOs were crammed into a tiny space with the media and shut out entirely from the process. Every scheduled briefing was cancelled. The night before the ministerial conference, the host government backtracked on assurances they could voice their concerns through leaflets, banners and mic checks. Taiwan, a WTO member, was also excluded by the Cameroon government to appease China. Both set dangerous precedents for the next ministerial conference in Saudi Arabia.

The WTO is now on a precipice, but some remain in a state of denial. New Zealand’s trade minister Todd McClay, who was vice-chair of the ministerial conference but left before it finished, described the final package of reforms as “within reach” , with securing them back in Geneva a priority for New Zealand. The Cameroonian chair claimed that trade ministers left with “clearer pathways, renewed trust and practice avenues for cooperation across multiple areas”, having “demonstrated unity in setting a clear and forward-looking direction for reform”.

The US assessment, however, was more blunt and honest: “This week’s conference confirmed that this organisation will only play a limited role in future global trade policy efforts.”