

Framing Trade and Peace in the Time of Covid-19: The World Trade Organization and the Narratives of Inclusion of Peripheral Trade Zones

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ABSTRACT:

As global trade plummeted during the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, multilateral institutions like the World Trade Organization (WTO) face increased pressure to remain relevant to their founding principles. After the Trade for Peace initiative was launched in 2017, the WTO has made the inclusion of conflict-affected and fragile states one of its priorities. The rationale that WTO accession serves as a transformational moment for these countries and as a means of securing a place in global trade was highlighted in the first “Trade for Peace Week” event organized by the WTO late in 2020. This paper analyses the narratives and frames used to link trade with peace of select sessions from this event. It finds that narratives of trade and peace complicated by framing actions. While improving trade access among fragile and conflict-affected and fragile states is increasingly hard to label as a technical fix, the processes to implement trade governance by engaging political actors reveals both the adoption of WTO narratives, but also revealing its limitations to address problems external to the aspiring member states themselves.

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Introduction

The liberal international order has been showing signs of strain. For many years, the Doha Round has failed to gather momentum and regional economic integration greatly outpaces the World Trade Organization's (WTO) purview for removing trade barriers globally. The signing of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) in 2020 (the largest currently in the world covering more than a third of global trade) casts a long shadow on the multilateral trade system.

But beyond economic regionalism's rise, the Trump administration's "America First" doctrine toward globalization has repercussions that survive the populist authoritarian politician's one term presidency. After Trump was voted out, trade protectionism remains saturated in the public's doubts toward the effects of globalization, but also as a policy tool to guard against vulnerable supply chains and national security concerns, and to "build back better" in the post-pandemic age. U.S. president Joe Biden in his first joint address to Congress called for a "America Jobs Plan" with "Buy American" as its core principle.¹ His administration has also balked at appointing members to the WTO Appellate Body, where trade disputes between member states are settled.²

International organizations are pressured to reinvent themselves to stay relevant as geopolitics threatens to unravel from once solid foundations of economic globalization and trade liberalization. This has been the case with the end of the Bretton Woods system and monetarist policies tied with the Washington Consensus. Now, with world trade dropping drastically due to COVID-19 and countries struggling to prevent the spread of the virus, the WTO finds itself at odds with an institutional past that has confined itself to reducing barriers to trade. Building on its "Trade for Peace" initiative, the organization is situating itself directly in the conversation on underdevelopment, moribund economic growth and the scourge to stability: border tensions, risks of open political conflict and fragile states. Taking action means talking to various stakeholders, combining the expertise and the transformative power of institutions even if the WTO lacks a territorial presence.

To this end, the WTO g7+ Accessions Group was launched in the 11th Ministerial Conference in Buenos Aires in 2017 in order to:

- i. to facilitate the integration of post-conflict and fragile economies into the multilateral trading system through WTO accession-related reforms, including the establishment of credible economic and trade policy frameworks and institutions, and the promotion of transparency and good governance, based on international best practices; and, ii. to support the efforts of the WTO acceding governments in the Group, including through information and experience sharing.³

For the WTO, the accession process entails encouraging the reform of domestic institutions that can enforce principles of non-discrimination, transparency and rule of law, which are the basis for economic stability and a business climate

conducive to investment. While highlighting these objectives, the WTO also emphasized the need to deepening its understanding and increasing its sensitivity towards the challenges faced by fragile and post-conflict states.⁴

Linking the WTO accession process to the target countries is the “Trade for Peace” initiative. According to the WTO, it is an interdisciplinary approach that leverages the multilateral trade system for peace and security. It aims to do so by “breaking down the silos of trade and peace” and providing outreach events to promote cross-sector collaboration.⁵ How these links are drawn and the role the WTO ought to play in the process that deserves scrutiny for several reasons. First, international organizations are critical in the diffusion of norms through both direct and indirect means. Second, the diffusion of norms is connected to framing and problem identification by actors in the regions themselves.⁶ Therefore, even if the WTO is able to build on its institutional power and spread international trade practices to the peripheries of world trade, the adaptation, emulation and resistance of those norms need to be investigated.

The remaining part of the article is a discussion of the WTO’s most recent attempts to stake out the narrative of linking trade with peace. It analyses the discussions among WTO officials and various stakeholders in the Trade for Peace week (taking place in December 2020) using narratives, and considering the role of positioning and framing. While improving trade access among fragile and conflict-affected and fragile states is increasingly hard to label as a technical fix, the processes to implement trade governance by engaging political actors reveals both the adoption of WTO narratives, but also revealing its limitations to address problems external to the aspiring member states themselves.

Narrative Power and Framing the Rules of Engagement

The Trade for Peace initiative represents the latest of the WTO’s means of public outreach, coming at a critical time due not only to the structural changes brought on by regionalism, protectionism and unilateralism, but also with the unfolding COVID-19 pandemic. An important means of analysing the role of discourse in structuring cognitive frameworks has been to look discursively at the actions of political actors.

According to Krebs, “stories are the vehicle through which human beings define their reality and link thought to action - through which they formulate and articulate identity...and interest...”⁷ The WTO situates itself as an international organization that generates the framework and rules in which its member states conduct trade. The corpus of its agreements provides the legal and normative basis on how nations interact, make claims and resolve disputes among one another. Through its public pronouncements, press releases, remarks by its officials and other publications, the narratives (re)produced by the WTO casts itself at the centre of regulating the ideal flows of trade between nations. While trade narratives often cast state protagonists and antagonists by activating certain cultural stereotypes and images⁸, these discourses can frame policy debates and prescribed courses of action relational to other stakeholders mapped out by the WTO.

The act of locating actors in such a narrative can be analysed through positioning. With reflexive positioning, actors situate themselves for a variety of purposes, including “claiming the high ground.”⁹ Past analyses of WTO positioning have included discrediting the claims and legitimacy of civil society actors by presenting the “reality” based on expertise, professionalism and the facts.¹⁰ The concept of reflexive positioning can be used to analyse the WTO’s narration of its position as the root cause (trade) leading to the outcome (peace).

Framing is the final component used to analyse these narratives. How information and events are viewed and understood by actors can be viewed through different frames. Diagnostic framing sets clear definitions of the problem, which in turn help determine the agents involved (being part of the problem OR being part of the solution).¹¹ Hopewell has written that past WTO discourses have acted as “invisible barricades” in policy debates with global civil society.¹² The problem of underdeveloped, fragile and post-conflict nation-states is that they are outside the multilateral trading system. Addressing that problem involves taking the necessary steps and reforms toward accession and becoming a participating member of the WTO.

Between November 30 and December 4, 2020, the WTO hosted its first-ever “Trade for Peace Week,” conducted virtually due to the ongoing pandemic. Ten sessions covering topics ranging from humanitarian and trade partnerships, the role of business and technology, trade in post-conflict affected states were discussed among WTO officials, member state representatives, international aid groups and civil society (including businesspersons and academics)¹³. This paper looks at two sessions which included the deputy director of the WTO (Opening Session and Session 10), as well as the panels that dealt directly with the connection between trade and peace (Session 4), trade during the COVID-19 crisis (Session 9) and African regional economic integration (Session 10). Each of the 90-minute sessions was conducted using videoconferencing. After introducing the idea behind the sessions, moderators invited the guests to give opening remarks. Following this round, questions were entertained from the audience or in some cases, participants in the event. A final round was later given for concluding remarks.

Opening Session

I don't think we emphasize peace. It's not in our vocabulary to the extent that it should be.

– WTO Deputy Director General Alan Wolff

In his speech to the Opening Session of the event, Alan Wolff, deputy director of the WTO, attempted to canonize the linkage between trade and peace, drawing his material from as far back to Plutarch. While trade does not guarantee peace, he stressed that trade makes generate economic stability in which peace depends upon.¹⁴

With regard to the post-war multilateral trading system, Wolff is more confident about the linkage between trade and peace, stating that the rules-based

system has enabled prosperity and poverty reduction never before seen in modern history.¹⁵ This story of trade bringing a more prosperous world has not reached its conclusion: more has to be done to highlight that causal link between trade and peace, especially among the trade and peace communities and those countries still trying to reap the benefits of WTO membership.

However, in a pre-recorded address, the former president of Timor-Leste Jose Ramos Horta emphasized that while trade is a conduit for peace, of particular concern was the increasing economic and social inequality between nations. He told of his country's own inability to reap the benefits of the oil and gas reserves it possesses and that post-conflict nations lack state capacity to enhance trade or infrastructure to achieve economic growth.¹⁶ Building off of a plea for the developed world to assist these countries that may see gains evaporate as the pandemic surges, Horta ended by stating the writing off of debts owed to developed countries was also an important issue that needed to be discussed.

Currently, the expertise of different stakeholders is needed to build stronger links between the peace and trade communities (thus implying they may have separate agendas and objectives) in order to bring "inclusive and sustainable peace through trade" to these areas. Wolff differentiates between traditional friends in the Trade for Peace efforts and newer partners, which include the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), the UN Peacebuilding Commission, the UN Office for Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs and Interpeace.

Vice-president of the ICRC, Gilles Carbonnier's remarks in the panel suggest that international law concerning regulation of armed conflict (discrimination between civilian/civilian objects, proportionality) can be equated with key principles international trade law (most-favoured nation, reciprocity, preferential treatment).¹⁷ The nature of armed conflict has changed, moving away from traditional battlefields among state actors toward protracted and fragmented conflict in urban environments. Peacebuilding, according to the ICRC, is therefore more complex because it involves a whole host of actors and must also adapt its processes. He exemplified how cross-sector collaboration in WTO and humanitarian aid could be realized through lifesaving situations to include food assistance in exemptions from export restrictions.¹⁸

The narratives aim to meld the humanitarian process with market logics. Humanitarian operations in Iraq moved away from the handout of essential food and charitable donations toward an "economic security approach. Cash grants instead of handouts to help restore local businesses (inside Mosul, Iraq), according to Carbonnier could "prevent destitution before it happens by maintaining the productive capital of affected people, and to move as soon as we can out of aid dependency." Markets, as the source of economic stability and productivity, are therefore also part of the humanitarian project of preventing conflict from spilling over into the economic sphere. These opportunities of revamped humanitarianism "can greatly benefit from an open, transparent and predictable trading system."¹⁹

Noura Tan, rapporteur for the Geneva Peacebuilding Platform in her remarks stressed the need for “stakeholder remapping” which would take into account more nuanced “business and peace narrative.” She highlighted that businesses (which should include micro/small and medium enterprises, informal sectors, and social startups) were being recast as “business entrepreneurs” in that they add positive value to peace building. The label “peace builders” on the other hand, has not been taken up by some local actors due to having their conduct labelled as “a political activity.”²⁰

This and other types of reframing to include more roles for traditional stakeholders is a key discussion point that will likely point the way toward how the WTO engages with stakeholders. Just as the WTO views the accession process of a potential member as the key to inter-ministerial discussions, so to must private actors be involved. As Wolff added later, the private sector constituency in each acceding country has a role to play and that they needed to be convinced that [accession] is in their interest.²¹ These points of discussion and the specificity to how language can be more suitably primed to bring various interests into trade-building institutions. Henk-Jan Brinkman, who heads the U.N. Peacebuilding Strategy and Partnership Branch stated that “peacebuilding” can be a concept employed pragmatically, while at the same time utilizing notions of “trust,” “social cohesion,” and “risk mitigation” within these communities.

Session 4: Trade, Conflict and Peace: Empirical Evidence

An important objective of the Trade for Peace Week event was to (re)cast and remember trade as a key causal factor in peace. As mentioned earlier, the WTO has sought to link itself as the driver of the causal chain in effecting peace. It therefore comes to little surprise that a dedicated panel seeking to establish this linkage empirically was organized. However, most of the panel discussants were aware of the problems involved in abstract models confronted with fact on the ground.²²

At the centre are Kantian ideas of commerce as the glue that hold nations together out of mutual self-interest, and that trade among peoples and nations is done out of their own interests. The WTO has tried to champion itself as the key conduit of this pursuit of perpetual peace through its rules and system of institutional bargaining and dispute settlement.

The causal direction is not always so clear to begin with. According to Serge Stroobants, the director of the Institute for Economics and Peace, the total annual economic impact of violence was 10.6% of the total world GDP. Therefore, “reinvestments of violence into peace” (i.e., well-functioning governments, low levels of corruption, etc.) could foster trade and business investment.²³ These assertions however do little to take into consideration the varying interests among different actors in and among nations.

Rational choice modeling involving the decision-making predictions “proved” the liberal peace orthodoxy, but with some important caveats. Michelle Garfinkel remarked that trade between economically interdependent rivals creates welfare benefits and makes arming costlier. However, in a model where the two

countries do not trade with each other but instead compete with each other to export to a third country, the terms of trade effects on security policies is positive. In this situation there is an “unambiguous” intensification of international conflict and loss of welfare.²⁴

The liberal peace argument has to take into other considerations such as common problems of causality and correlation, according to Mathias Thoenig. Reverse causality (the effects of war on trade for example between India and Pakistan) and omitted variables (the sharing of a common border leading to trade and disputes) are factors that researchers should not gloss over. While larger data sets and improved empirical methods are improving theoretical models looking at the relationship between trade and peace, Thoenig take a more conservative outlook when it comes to formulating policy recommendations based on theory alone. For instance, an increase in bilateral trade and the resultant economic interdependencies between rival countries leads to lower chances of war, but those same trade policies may divert existing away existing interdependencies. While conceding that multilateralism through the WTO is not the end-all for world conflict, viewing trade negotiations as a means of addressing information asymmetries among states means that the organization’s role is still crucial.²⁵

Session 9: Trade in the Time of COVID

Let’s not waste this terrible, terrible crisis...

– Susanna Moorehead, Development Assistance Committee, OECD

This panel might actually be the most important since it addresses the immediate problems faced by the g7+ countries that the WTO must work to mitigate if it wants to build legitimacy in the region. However, participants of the session used key parts of the WTO narrative for their own purposes rather than developing a consensus to address key problems in readying the countries for the challenges faced.

As the foreign minister of the Solomon Islands noted, fragile economies will suffer most from the pandemic as its sources of income through exports have dried up as well as remittances from abroad. The Solomon Islands, Timor Leste and Sao Tome and Principe (all g7+ Accessions Group members) are among the countries predicated to have the largest increases in poverty rates from COVID-19 in 2020.²⁶ He however also employed the key tenets of the WTO mission in his remarks, stating the need for “solidarity against protectionism” (which was said to be especially harmful to vulnerable countries) and that the multilateral framework needed to be reaffirmed. That being said, the WTO needed to increase its inclusiveness of issues pertaining to addressing development needs (i.e., the Doha Development Agenda).

The Liberian commerce minister stated that supply chains and shortages of key commodities like fuel and foodstuffs were potential sources of unrest and challenged efforts to curb the virus. The pandemic therefore needed to be dealt with if the economy was to become viable for trade.²⁷

According to Sierra Leone's minister of planning and economic development and g7+ chair, measures were needed to help close the gap between underdeveloped countries and the rest of the world. Regional cooperation was seen as the means of addressing conflict and barriers to bilateral and multilateral trade. He also stated that beyond trade, richer countries needed to continue their current levels of Official Development Assistance (ODA), while a reduction would reverse hard-won gains. He also mentioned debt relief.²⁸

In setting out the OECD's position, the chair of the Development Assistance Committee Susanna Moorehead first contextualized the development challenges faced by fragile and conflict-affected states, but also by generalizing common characteristics of the membership (communities hit by the aftermath of ongoing crises such as Ebola). Beyond peace building and the humanitarian response however, the focus of the meeting needed to be on "how do you trade your way out of fragility." Stability is found in "jobs, integration of markets and economic diversification."²⁹ These remarks help frame the action plans without addressing the root causes of the fragility.

The OECD panellist's remarks about ODA called for recipient countries to remember that pressure on all economies exist and that poverty is also arising outside of fragile countries. The way forward would be getting back to the Sustainable Development Goals of 2015. On the trade side, investments in infrastructure, and initiatives like the "Humanitarian Development and Conflict Prevention Nexus" and small traders. This is not just about a technical fix. "This is about politicians, ministers, civil society, citizens sitting down together, hammering out differences to build peace."³⁰

While trade is viewed as going beyond technical processes, normative roles also proscribe the morality of trade. Not all trade is good. Indeed, the "dark side of trade" (arms, drugs, human beings) needed to be addressed.

Some sorts of trade can thrive no matter what. That we need to stamp out this bad trade and replace that trade with goods and services that will help fragile and conflict-affected states become islands of stability.³¹

Good trade, on the other hand, depends on the creation of infrastructure that comes from government reforms that help improve the investment climate. The framing of the issue of ideal conditions points to opposing positions. While the Liberian minister of commerce Mawine Diggs also stated the importance of private sector led growth, technical assistance and trade building capacity needed to be addressed. For developing countries, ODA reductions are the key point of concern. On the other hand, Moorehead representing the OECD, stated that the effectiveness of development assistance was engaging with member countries on how those resources are spent.

Session 10: Using Trade Integration to Promote Peace in the Horn of Africa

We need action in Africa. The world is moving and we want to catch up. We have to move faster.

– Agak Achuil, undersecretary of trade and industry, South Sudan

In the concluding session of the Trade for Peace week, Wolff affirmed the WTO's support for the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), calling it a means of solidifying the continent's post-pandemic economic recovery and adding value to African trade. Regionalism has created a challenge to WTO, as members side-step the multilateral body to create discriminatory blocs that hamper the uniformity of trade rules. WTO narratives try to smooth over these contradictions. For instance, regional trade acting as a peace mechanism can "only be increased through broader multilateral cooperation" and under the auspices of both the AfCFTA and the WTO. By comparing Africa's low inter-regional trade vis-a-vis Asia and Europe (18 % versus 58 % and 67 %, respectively), regionalism is framed as the norm for global trade. By stating that the AfCFTA is built on WTO principles and 30 overlapping memberships, the organization wants to claim the FTA as a key part of its objectives in pushing multilateralism. African countries outside the WTO would be trained on the organization's rules and procedures, in order to "facilitate coherence and complementarities between the AfCFTA and the WTO." Moreover, the free trade agreement is noteworthy since it explicitly linked trade and peace in its treaty language, which paralleled the WTO's precursor, the International Trade Organization.³²

Wolff also called the former Liberian minister of commerce Axel Addy "an original skilled practitioner of Trade for Peace" having negotiated that country's accession into the WTO. Addy called WTO membership "another means at a global level to enhance economic opportunities for African countries to accelerate growth thus increasing the potential for peace." If African countries would follow through and join the rules-based system, venture capital would flow in. He also added that Liberia was "rebranded" after WTO accession, becoming a "reliable, fair and predictable partner at peace."³³

Other panellists affirmed the trade for peace narratives. The United Nations Economic Commission for Africa regional integration and trade director stated that the WTO's rules-based system was part of "people-centred development" and that the African FTA was "an additional cog" in creating an international framework. Integration of economies would strengthen trade and prosperity, thereby reducing security challenges.³⁴

Future Directions

You are all business people, entrepreneurs which is very important in the WTO accession process. At the end of the day, the accession process is about creating, enabling an

*environment to trade, whether it's for domestic or cross border.*³⁵

– Maika Oshikawa, director of WTO accessions division

The WTO's Trade for Peace initiative may become a synergy of trade and peace building strategies if dialogue includes local stakeholders and with careful consideration of cross-sector effects of policy. If agencies have clear divisions of labour and work to overcome different institutional priorities, trade can be better employed as an antecedent to peace. The framing of the process and the identity of those involved and their prescribed roles will have a bearing on how and why specific strategies are formulated or left out of consideration.

According to Interpeace president Scott Weber, political, social, and economic aspects are part of the three-legged stool in rebuilding fragile and post-conflict affected states. The political and social legs involve peace and state building, where leadership from the states themselves is crucial for reconciliation and international organizations can assist by supplying security and capacity building.³⁶ For instance, the African Union Mission in Somalia (AMISOM) is an extensive interagency security effort involving the African Union, the European Union and the United States that has helped the central government consolidate control and regain significant internal sovereignty in Somalia.³⁷ These peacekeeping efforts allow the state to function and operate beyond mere regime survival. On the border regions of Sudan and South Sudan, the United Nations Interim Security Force for Abyei (UNISFA) demonstrate how security is crucial for nascent cross-border markets. Besides the exchange of goods, markets, through negotiations among local and national stakeholders, can be a source of information and confidence-building. However, without the force of law and clear lines of authority, security operations are limited in their role to maintain the safety and smooth operation of these markets.³⁸ Therefore, the continued presence of inter-organizational security operations will be needed to ensure the political and social legs can be maintained.

But WTO doctrine toward accession conditionalities may prove antithetical to development if the policies of trade liberalization engendered lock-in continued dependency. Open trade regimes may as the World Bank and WTO proffer that liberalization allows cheaper imports, but they downplay the role that the same policies have which may decimate vulnerable indigenous farming communities. Moreover, as LDCs are pressured to liberalize their internal markets, reciprocal liberalization that would increase the flow of exports abroad have not caught on. In this regard, WTO policies such as special and differential treatment (SDT) and special safeguard mechanisms (SSM) can be instituted into frameworks concerning fragile and conflict-affected states.³⁹ World Bank technical expertise can help pinpoint exogenous and endogenous factors affecting country's trade policies – but policy recommendations should be coordinated to ensure that politics and social effects of trade don't fall into one-sized fits all doctrine of liberalization and privatization above all other considerations.

As a follow up to the event, the WTO launched its Trade for Peace Network, as a means of providing a platform for policymakers and experts to continue to exchange ideas.⁴⁰ The WTO also hopes to develop a “White Paper on Trade and Peace” that include trade policy instruments and practices for building peace. Furthermore, the White Paper is seen as launching an agenda for the Trade and Peace initiative.

Up to now, the Trade for Peace initiative’s framing of the WTO’s role recognizes that trade requires solid institutional supports that cannot easily be implemented as fragile countries are ravaged by the pandemic. As Gray has written, international organizations like the WTO enter lifecycles that include death, life, change and inertia.⁴¹ Inclusion also means that greater efforts to understand the local and regional power distributions between hybrid governments of formal and informal structures and trading need to be evaluated not as “good or bad” but serving disparate social and political needs. As the WTO seeks to accommodate new members, unresolved issues including its increasingly dysfunctional dispute settlement mechanism, resolving the impasse over intellectual property rights and access to life-saving vaccines will remain. As members balance their competitive aspirations among regional trade agreements and multilateral liberalization, the WTO’s (in)ability to repurpose itself to bridge these divides will face close scrutiny.

What the role of the WTO in the economic peace building remains open to possibilities. If utilizing a definition of economic peacebuilding as “the search for alignment of economic development vision with the political peace and the greater social good of the community,” economic development needs to be suffused with socially inclusive policies and the benefits of trade need to be shared. The WTO naturally sees the accession process as the proving ground for institutional reforms that guarantee that new members can adhere to the holy trinity of non-discrimination, transparency and predictability. The process of accession not only is a litmus test for government reforms and ministerial coordination, but signals to international partners that a country is ready for business. Liberia’s successful accession as an LDC could serve as a model for Somalia. Best practices and sharing of experiences among state officials can help with technical issues during the Working Parties and post-accession process.

Future research can be utilized to map the narratives of the WTO on the (re)construction of fragile, conflict-affected states the proving ground for pandemic-era trade and development policies. The function of framing and positioning of trade policies, and the prescribed role of relevant stakeholders can be further analysed to evaluate the extent in which inclusiveness of different actors is demonstrated. Framing the discussion of conditions in *which* trade fosters peace rather than *if* it does may also give more nuanced formulation of markets and trade beyond “positive and negative” but how and why they emerge, and how they can best be understood in relation to sustainable economic development.

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