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**27 March 2026**



## UPSC 360°

**The Hindu Unwrapped** - Daily Current Affairs Mastery for UPSC CSE (Clear that it's based on The Hindu editorials / news analyses - very aspirant-friendly)

### Significance

The World Trade Organization Ministerial Conference (MC14) is crucial for reviving multilateral trade negotiations, addressing issues like food security, fisheries subsidies, and dispute settlement reforms. It holds significance for developing countries, including India, in protecting policy space and ensuring equitable global trade governance.

### WTO Ministerial Conference (MC14)

#### Why in News?

- The **14th Ministerial Conference (MC14)** of the World Trade Organization (WTO) began on **26 March 2026** in Geneva amid intense debates on reforming the multilateral trading system, reviving the dispute settlement mechanism, and addressing emerging issues such as e-commerce and investment facilitation.
- The conference is taking place against the backdrop of rising protectionism, stalled Appellate Body appointments, and deepening divisions between developed and developing countries.
- India has taken a firm stand on several issues, opposing the continuation of the e-commerce moratorium and the plurilateral Investment Facilitation for Development (IFD) Agreement, while pushing for a permanent solution on public stockholding for food security and balanced fisheries subsidies.

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- The outcomes of MC14 are expected to shape global trade rules for the next few years and will have significant implications for India's policy space in agriculture, digital economy, and development priorities.

## Key Issues at WTO MC14

- **WTO Reforms & Dispute Settlement Crisis**
  - The Appellate Body remains paralysed since 2019 due to the US blocking new judge appointments.
  - Developed countries (led by the US) are pushing for structural reforms, including reconsideration of the Most-Favoured Nation (MFN) principle and greater use of plurilateral agreements (subset of members).
  - Developing countries, including India, insist on preserving the consensus-based decision-making and special and differential treatment (S&DT).
- **E-commerce Moratorium**
  - In place since 1998, it prohibits customs duties on electronic transmissions (e.g., software, digital services).
  - Developed countries want permanent extension; India, Indonesia, and South Africa strongly oppose it.
  - India's argument: Significant potential revenue loss, restricted policy space for digital regulation, and unequal benefits for developing countries lacking technological capacity.
- **Investment Facilitation for Development (IFD) Agreement**
  - China-backed plurilateral agreement supported by over 120 members.
  - Aims to streamline FDI procedures and improve investment climate.
  - India opposes its inclusion in the WTO framework, arguing it bypasses consensus and could have strategic implications for global investment flows.

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- **Public Stockholding for Food Security**

- India continues to demand a permanent solution to the existing 10% subsidy ceiling under WTO rules.
- Critical for India's MSP-based procurement and food security programmes (covering ~80 crore beneficiaries under NFSA).

- **Fisheries Subsidies**

- India advocates a balanced agreement that protects small-scale fishers' livelihoods while promoting sustainability.
- Calls for greater responsibility from developed nations engaged in distant-water fishing.

## Background: WTO & India's Engagement

- **WTO Establishment**

- Founded: 1 January 1995 (successor to GATT 1947).
- Core principles: MFN, National Treatment, Transparency, Consensus-based decision-making.

- **Institutional Structure**

- Ministerial Conference (highest decision-making body, every two years).
- Dispute Settlement Body (currently dysfunctional).
- Trade Policy Review Mechanism.

- **India's Traditional Stance**

- Strong defender of developing country interests and S&DT.
- Cautious approach on new issues (e.g., e-commerce, investment) to protect policy space.

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- Past experience (e.g., ITA-1) has made India wary of binding commitments without adequate safeguards.

## Implications

### • For Global Trade

- MC14 outcomes will determine whether WTO can regain relevance or continue to fragment into plurilateral/minilateral arrangements.
- Failure on dispute settlement reform could further erode trust in the multilateral system.

### • For India

- Success in securing permanent solution on public stockholding would strengthen food security architecture.
- Opposition to e-commerce moratorium protects fiscal space and regulatory autonomy in the digital economy.
- Strengthening of S&DT is critical for a developing economy with high poverty and informal sector.

### • Broader Geopolitical

- Reflects growing North-South divide and competition between multilateralism and “club-based” trade arrangements (e.g., CPTPP, IPEF).

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## UPSC CSE & State PCS Relevance

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## Prelims

- Key terms: WTO MC14, E-commerce Moratorium, Public Stockholding, Investment Facilitation Agreement (IFD), Most-Favoured Nation (MFN), Special and Differential Treatment (S&DT)
- Data: Moratorium since 1998; India’s position on public stockholding (10% subsidy ceiling issue)

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- Related: GATT, Doha Development Agenda, Paris Agreement linkage

## GS-2 (IR)

- Multilateral trade governance & India's negotiating strategy
- Global South solidarity in WTO

## GS-3 (Economy)

- Trade policy, subsidies, and food security
- Digital economy regulation and e-commerce

## GS-2 (Governance)

- Role of international organisations in global economic governance

## Essay / Interview

- "WTO in Crisis: Can Multilateralism Survive in an Era of Plurilateralism and Protectionism?"
- "India's Stand at WTO MC14: Balancing Development Priorities with Global Trade Rules"

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## MCQs

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1. With reference to the 14th WTO Ministerial Conference (MC14), consider the following statements:
2. India has opposed the continuation of the e-commerce moratorium on customs duties.
3. The Investment Facilitation for Development (IFD) Agreement is a plurilateral initiative backed by China.
4. Public stockholding for food security is a key demand of India at the WTO.

Which of the statements given above is/are correct?

- (a) 1 only

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- (b) 1 and 2 only
- (c) 2 and 3 only
- (d) 1, 2 and 3

**Answer: (d)**

2. The Most-Favoured Nation (MFN) principle under the WTO means:

- (a) Special treatment for developing countries
- (b) Equal treatment to all member countries in trade matters
- (c) Preferential treatment for least developed countries
- (d) Bilateral trade agreements only

**Answer: (b)**

3. The e-commerce moratorium at the WTO has been in place since:

- (a) 1995
- (b) 1998
- (c) 2001
- (d) 2015

**Answer: (b)**

4. Which of the following is NOT a core principle of the WTO?

- (a) Most-Favoured Nation
- (b) National Treatment
- (c) Consensus-based decision-making
- (d) Unilateral tariff imposition

**Answer: (d)**

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## Mains Questions

1. "The 14th WTO Ministerial Conference is taking place at a time when the multilateral trading system is facing an existential crisis." Discuss the major issues at MC14 and India's negotiating position. (15 marks / 250 words)
2. Analyse India's concerns regarding the e-commerce moratorium and the Investment Facilitation Agreement at the WTO. How do these positions reflect India's broader development priorities? (10 marks / 150 words)
3. "Public stockholding for food security remains a critical unresolved issue at the WTO." Examine India's demands and the challenges in reaching a permanent solution. (15 marks / 250 words)
4. **Essay (250 marks)** "WTO Reforms in a Fragmenting World: Can Multilateralism Survive Amid Rising Plurilateralism and Protectionism?"

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