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25th April 2025

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Amidst regional ferment, Kurds quest for statehood

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- Kurds demand for statehood

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Amidst regional ferment, Kurds' quest for statehood

West Asia is in a geo-engineering flux not seen since the birth of Israel 77 years ago. The perennial Palestinian issue is at a pivotal moment with an extreme right Israeli government's hard-line position at odds with the Arab States' insistence on a two-state solution for the Abraham Accords' expansion. After the loss of regional proxies and the resumption of American "maximum pressure" tactics and military threat, a weakened and isolated Iran has agreed to negotiate its nuclear programme. The toppling of the five decades-old al-Assad regime has created new paradigms. Although Turkey has ambitions to reshape Syria, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan is battling an Intefadah at home. The decline of oil prices by a fifth in 2025 may upend the regional economic stability. Amidst this tumult, U.S. President Donald Trump, the global disruptor of "Gaza Riviera" fame, is set to pay his first visit abroad to the Gulf next month.

How does this regional commotion impact a century-old quest by Kurds for statehood? In the past century, two diaspora-based states, viz. Israel and Armenia, have been created in West Asia. Could Kurdistan be the next or, once again, likely to be brushed under the carpet as weightier developments and superpower politics take precedence? Let us examine the prospects in some detail.

An unrealised dream

Kurds are not only the biggest minority group in West Asia, but they are also the world's largest ethnic minority without a state of their own. Estimates vary, but their total population is put at 35 million-45 million. The overwhelming majority of them live in Turkey (around 17 million, 20% of the total population), Iraq (9 million, 20%), Iran (8 million, 10%), and Syria (2.5 million, 10%).

Kurd diaspora exists in Germany (around 1.5 million) and other West European countries. While Kurds have their sub-divisions, their common identity is shaped by a shared history and the craggy geography of Asia Minor. Anthropological studies put them to be of Old Mediterranean and Caucasian stock, distinct from either Turkic, Semitic, or Iranian ethnicities dominating their existence. While most Kurds are Sunni Muslims, they are linked to other regional ethnic minorities, such as Yazidis, Alevi, and Zoroastrianism.

The Kurds have a reputation for gritty bravery. Historically, they have often been either exploited as a geopolitical pawn or subject to suppression and exclusion. One of the rare occasions when they led the endgame was in the 12th century when Salahuddin, a Kurd General, commanded the Islamic legion to liberate Jerusalem from crusading Christian armies. The Kurdish quest for a state has remained unrequited. The nearest the Kurds came to realising this ambition was at the



Mahesh Sachdev
Retired Indian Ambassador with an interest in West Asian geopolitics. He is currently the president of Eco-Diplomacy and Strategies, based in New Delhi

Treaty of Sevres in 1920, negotiated to dismantle the Ottoman empire. It promised the Kurds an autonomous state in eastern Turkey. However, the Young Turks under Kemal Ataturk thwarted the Kurdistan Homeland project and instead foisted assertive Turkish nationalism. Since then, Ankara has single-mindedly suppressed the identity of Kurds, who were officially called "mountain Turks". This repression has continued: as late as 1994, a Kurdish female MP was sentenced to 15 years in prison for temerity to speak a sentence in Kurdish after her swearing in about the Kurd-Turk brotherhood.

Counterproductive repression

Turkish repression has been counterproductive: it led to the formation in 1978 of PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party) by Abdullah Öcalan which has waged a campaign for Kurdish independence. Öcalan was caught in 1999 and is still in solitary confinement in a Turkish jail. Four decades of no-holds-barred conflict has killed an estimated 37,000 people. Following the recent softening of Ankara's policies, Mr. Öcalan has called for the cessation of hostilities and PKK declared a ceasefire on March 15. Turkey has announced a \$20 billion socio-economic reconstruction plan for the south-east of the country where most Kurds live but a political package to bring the Kurds to the Turkish mainstream is still awaited.

The 13-year civil war provided Syria's Kurds a rare opportunity to fill in the politico-strategic vacuum. With substantive American support, a formidable Kurdish Self Defence Force (SDF) was created to fight the Islamic State and al-Qaeda. SDF currently controls nearly 40% of Syria. This has caused considerable threat perceptions in Ankara which accuses SDF of helping PKK. Turkey has sought to checkmate the SDF by creating exclusion zones and forming a militia against it. However, the US pressure has prevented it from an anti-SDF military campaign. In a potentially far-reaching move on March 11, the SDF Commander and the interim Syrian President signed a basic agreement to integrate the SDF into the new Damascus politico-strategic architecture. Even otherwise, SDF's good fortunes may diminish with the planned attenuation of American military presence in Syria.

During Saddam Hussein's rule, Kurds in neighbouring Iraq suffered brutal pogroms, forced deportation and even chemical weapons attacks. However, the situation changed in 1991 after the U.S. Operation Desert Storm substantially weakened Iraqi hold over Kurds and a Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) was formed in 1992. The Constitution of Iraq following the U.S. occupation of the country granted the KRG considerable autonomy although a 2017 referendum on Kurdistan Regional Independence, which received 92% support, was

disallowed by the Iraqi Supreme Court stating that no Iraqi province was allowed to secede. Meanwhile, oil-rich KRG has sought to assert its autonomy, often creating a piquant situation with Baghdad authorities. Following an international arbitration ruling, oil exports through the Kirkuk-Ceyhan pipeline have been suspended for the past two years. Turkish armed forces have also been active in hitting alleged PKK targets in KRG. Iran, too, has occasionally attacked the alleged hostile U.S.-Israeli presence in KRG. Thus, although KRG has now been around for over three decades, its existence is still quite tenuous.

The situation of Iranian Kurds

Compared to repression elsewhere in the region, the Iranian regimes have been marginally benign to its Kurds who mostly live in the northwest of the country along mountainous borders with Turkey and Iraq; some Kurds are also living in the Khorasan province in the northeast. These areas lie along the geo-strategic faultlines, forcing Kurds to choose between loyalty to Tehran, Ankara, or Baghdad. Unlike in other Kurdish-populated countries, there are strong ethnic and cultural ties between Kurds and Persians and some modern Iranian dynasties were partly of Kurdish origin. While Tehran has never employed the same level of brutality against its own Kurds as Turkey or Iraq, it has always been implacably opposed to Kurdish separatism. During the long Persian-Ottoman wars and the recent Iran-Iraq war, largely Sunni Kurds were often suspected of being the fifth column of the foreign powers. Under the Islamic Republic, attempts to Persianise, and general economic deprivation, spurred centrifugal tendencies among Iranian Kurds. With the considerable weakening of the Iranian state and looming prospects of the U.S.-Israel military campaign against Tehran, Iranian Kurds, the country's largest minority, may feel encouraged to secede.

Recent weakening of the central authority in each of the aforementioned four countries has brightened the prospects of Kurdish statehood and such proto-states have already emerged in Iraq and Syria. At the same time, they neither have a unifying ideology such as Zionism nor a transnational political entity to dovetail their statehood to the emerging grand Western strategy for West Asia. Their hopes rest on the regional entropy creating a situation conducive to the creation of a Kurdistan. However, even if such a pro-Western surrogate Kurdish state is grafted, it remains to be seen whether it would face autoimmune rejection (as Israel) from regional powers or take deep roots.

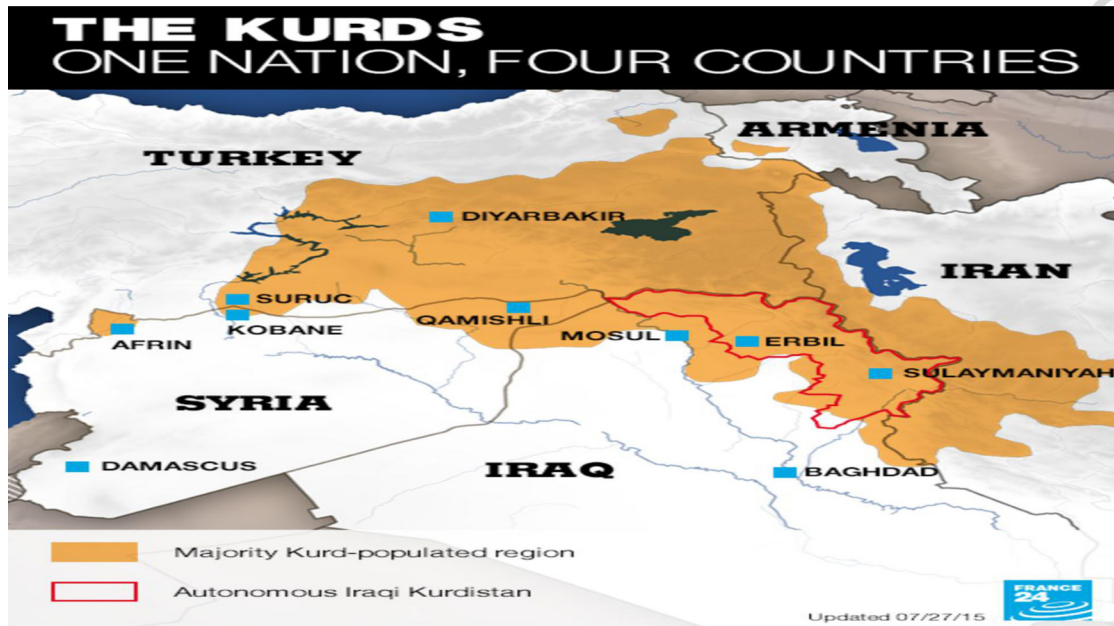
In short, Kurds' fate currently swings between two of their apt proverbs: "It is easy to catch a serpent with someone else's hand" and "Kurds (as a nation) have no friends, except the mountains."

The prospects of Kurds being able to realise their aspirations for statehood have brightened. At the same time, Kurds remain divided along national, tribal, and intra-ethnic lines



Key Takeaways from the Article

- **Kurdish Quest for Statehood:**
 - ♦ **Kurdish Population:** The Kurds are the world's largest ethnic group without a state, spread across countries like **Turkey, Iraq, Syria, and Iran**.
 - ♦ Their population is estimated at **35 to 45 million**, with a large diaspora in Europe.



- ♦ **Historical Context:** The Kurdish quest for statehood dates back to 1920 with the **Treaty of Sevres**, which promised them a state, but it was thwarted by the Turkish nationalists.
- ♦ Since then, their aspiration for a homeland has faced continuous suppression and displacement, particularly by Turkey.

Who and where are the Kurds?

An estimated 25-30 million Kurds mostly live in Turkey, Syria, Iraq and Iran. The Kurds, who are mostly Sunni Muslims, do not have an official homeland and continue to seek recognition, political rights, autonomy or independence.





Where tariffs trump economics

Why in News?

- ◆ Reciprocal tariffs

Syllabus

- ◆ GS Paper 2 – International Relations

Where tariffs trump economics

The recently announced reciprocal tariffs by U.S. President Donald Trump have led to a decline in the prices of key commodities, crude oil, volatility, and a downturn in stock markets. Since the tariff announcement, crude oil prices have declined by nearly 14%. This drop is driven by fears that the global economy, particularly trade between major economies, may slow down, which could lead to reduced demand for oil. The responses to the announcement have reinforced concerns that a full-scale global trade war is now under way. New trade tensions could lead to higher inflation, slower economic growth, and escalating disputes. More importantly, the announcement has ushered in an extended period of uncertainty, opening up new challenges to economic policy making. While higher-income economies have the time and armoury to retaliate to U.S. policies, lower-income ones face a double disadvantage. They have to cope with a new world order, while addressing pressing domestic economic issues.

The role of reciprocal tariffs

Reciprocal tariff is a tax that one country places on another in response to similar actions taken by that country. The rationale for this response is to protect local businesses, preserve jobs, and fix trade imbalances. Though the idea behind reciprocal tariffs is to create balance in trade, they can lead to a back-and-forth increase in trade barriers with negative impacts on both economies. The evolution of reciprocal tariffs can be traced to when countries began using tariffs to shield their local industries, boost economic growth, and negotiate better trade deals. While reciprocal tariffs can help local industries in the short run, they lead to higher prices for consumers, disrupt supply chains, and slow down growth. Tariffs were a major source of income for governments, but this has greatly



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Views are personal

The proposed tariffs are expected to deliver a blow to India's merchandise exports to the U.S.

reduced. They now serve as protective measures or negotiation tools.

Targeting Asia

Two aspects of the tariff tirade stand out. First, no other regions have been hit as hard as South Asia and Southeast Asia. Economic development over the past three decades in these regions has largely been driven by exports to the rest of the world, particularly the U.S. Exports to the U.S. contribute around 30% of Vietnam's GDP and 25% of Cambodia's. Vietnam and Cambodia have been hit by some of the highest tariffs (46% and 49%, respectively). Thailand, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Singapore have been hit by tariffs of varying magnitudes. Among countries of that region, this round of tariffs poses perhaps the greatest threat for Cambodia. The garment industry, which employs close to 750,000 workers, has been crucial in providing steady incomes to the poor. Thousands of jobs in this sector are now likely to be lost. The smaller economies of Southeast Asia are not in a position to retaliate, unlike China, which has hit back with its own measures. These economies can only negotiate. And the interests of the U.S. would primarily guide such negotiations.

The second is the curious case of calculation of tariffs. The formula underpinning reciprocal tariff is the country's trade deficit with the U.S., divided by its exports, and then divided by two. The U.S. also implemented a 10% baseline tariff on almost every country. However, the formula for calculating tariff rates for nations around the world is based on an elasticity rate lower than it should be in practice. The formula assumes an elasticity of import prices with respect to tariffs of about 0.25, but economists are of the view that the number should be closer to one. This one-size-fits-all formula is blunt as it applies the same math to countries whether they have

substantial trade barriers or wide-open markets. It considers only the size of the trade deficit, not why the deficit exists. Also, the trade deficit is calculated using only goods (items that can be shipped) and not services (technology, banking). This benefits countries which export few goods but plenty of financial services to the U.S.

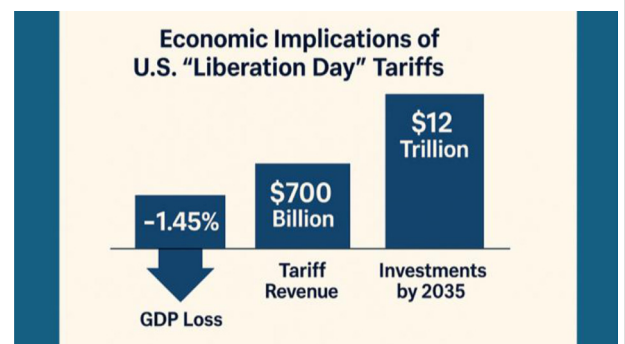
Prospects for India

The proposed tariffs are expected to deliver a blow to India's merchandise exports to the U.S. If tariff plans are implemented after the current pause, India could see a \$7.76 billion drop (6.4%) in exports to the U.S. this year, according to an estimate by Global Trade Research Initiative. In 2024, India exported \$89 billion worth of goods to the U.S. This underscores the need for India to broaden the trade base necessitating swift trade policy actions. First, India has to secure a balanced trade deal with the U.S., which requires continuous negotiations. Second, it needs to fast-track trade agreements with the European Union, the U.K., and Canada. Third, it needs to deepen ties with Russia, Japan, South Korea, ASEAN, and the UAE. Fourth, it needs to handle ties with China with deftness and strategic intent.

Some believe that India could convert the situation into an opportunity. These beliefs are partly driven by the spectacular success of Apple's iPhone exports from India (by 54% last year). Hidden behind this achievement is the fact that the total goods exports for 2024-25 was \$437 billion, which is the same as last year. Given this reality, cashing on the present situation requires enormous homework. A set of coherent reforms encompassing rationalised tariffs, simpler GST, easier trade processes and fair implementation of quality standards and controls are prerequisites for such an ambition. Easier, straightforward responses to intensify inward orientation runs the risk of missing a global moment.

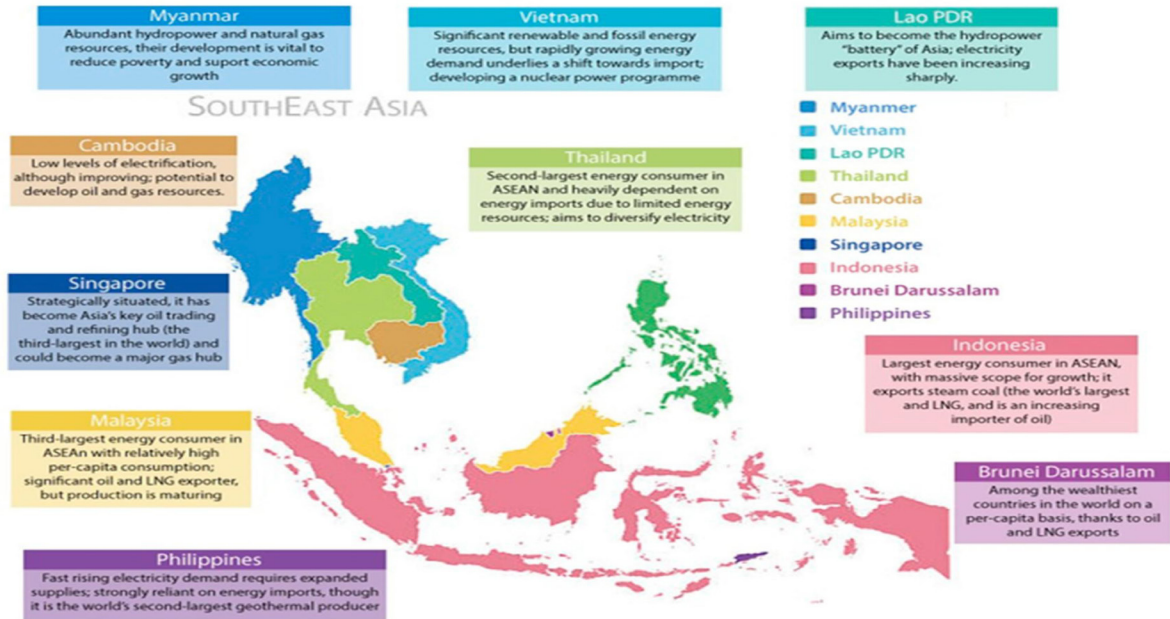
Key Takeaways from the Article

- **Reciprocal Tariffs and Their Economic Impact:**
 - ◆ **Reciprocal Tariffs:** These are taxes levied by one country in response to similar actions from another.
 - ◆ They often lead to negative economic impacts such as **higher consumer prices, disrupted supply chains, and slower growth.**
 - ◆ **Impact on Global Trade:** The recent U.S. tariff announcement has led to a **decline in crude oil prices and increased market volatility**, as fears grow regarding potential global trade slowdowns.



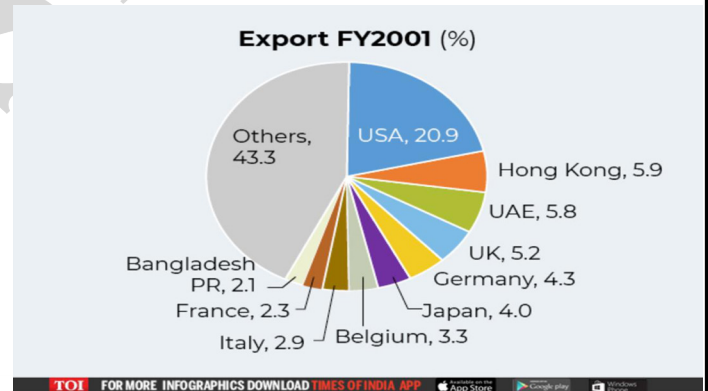
● Impact on South Asia and Southeast Asia:

- ◆ **Economic Vulnerability:** The countries in South and Southeast Asia have been hit hard, especially Vietnam, Cambodia, and other Southeast Asian economies that rely on exports to the U.S.



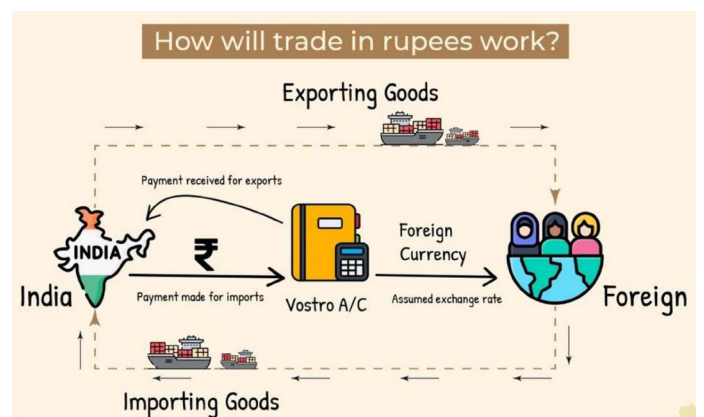
● Prospects for India:

- ◆ **India's Merchandise Exports:** India's exports to the U.S. may fall by **\$7.76 billion (6.4%)** due to the proposed tariffs.
- ◆ India's broader **trade base must be diversified** to offset these losses.
- ◆ India must pursue a **balanced trade deal with the U.S.**, deepen trade ties with other global players like the EU, U.K., Russia, Japan, South Korea, ASEAN, and UAE.



● Strategic Recommendations for India:

- ◆ India should prioritize **diversification** of its trade partnerships to reduce dependence on any single market, particularly the U.S.
- ◆ India must focus on **reforms** to make its trade processes more efficient, including simplifying the GST system and rationalizing tariffs.
- ◆ The **economic diplomacy** should be leveraged to build stronger relations with emerging economies and traditional allies to create a more balanced global trade framework.





Is the WTO still relevant?

Why in News?

- ♦ WTO role amidst tariff war

Syllabus

- ♦ GS Paper 3 – Indian Economy

Is the World Trade Organization still relevant?



Mohan Kumar

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Mark Linscott

Senior Adviser with the U.S. India Strategic Partnership Forum and former assistant, United States Trade Representative for South and Central Asia

PARLEY

United States President Donald Trump's 'reciprocal tariffs' have been compared to the Smoot-Hawley tariffs of the 1930s, which many say hastened the slide into the Great Depression. The difference between the 1930s and now is that we have the World Trade Organization (WTO) to oversee and enforce global trade rules. However, some argue that over the years, the WTO has gradually lost its compass and is in need of massive reforms. Is the WTO still relevant? Mark Linscott and Mohan Kumar discuss the question in a conversation moderated by **Samreen Wani**. Edited excerpts:

Has the WTO been sidelined? Will the U.S. pay heed to any advice from the WTO?

Mohan Kumar: The WTO, as we know it, is gone. It is irrelevant and has been sidelined. I don't want to say it is dead yet. The WTO was expected to perform three functions – the negotiating function, the dispute settlement function, and the trade monitoring function – and it is not performing any of them. The negotiating function has gone for a six since Doha [the Doha Round of talks in 2001]. There is only one multilateral agreement – the fisheries agreement – that has been concluded, and even that has not been fully concluded. The Appellate body or the dispute settlement mechanism (DSM) has also been rendered dysfunctional. It started during Barack Obama's time. Since then, the U.S. has blocked appointments to the Appellate body, the ultimate court of appeal. The WTO tries to do whatever it can under the trade monitoring function, but that is not being performed efficiently because there is a lot of opacity about trade measures from a number of members, particularly one big member. The fact that the Trump tariffs are happening at a time when the multilateral trading system has been rendered toothless and inefficient makes it much more serious.

Mark Linscott: I agree with Ambassador Kumar that the WTO has been sidelined. The decline of the WTO and its diminishing relevance goes back long before the first Trump administration to the launch of the Doha Round. I think that mandate was misplaced. It was perhaps too ambitious, too far reaching, and basically [had] mismatched expectations. We also had the accession of China. And I think there was a degree of naivete about how well WTO rules would function with respect to China's measures and its behaviour on trade. During the Doha Round, the mismatched expectations involved



A logo outside the WTO in Geneva, Switzerland. REUTERS

Trump administration. There were efforts to negotiate on large disparities on tariffs and [there was] really no traction in those negotiations to lower tariffs multilaterally on a non-discriminatory basis.

The U.S. has for too long blocked appointments to the Appellate body, but there were grievances associated with the operations of the WTO's DSM and the Appellate body, and whether it was in fact engaging in 'legislating' as opposed to simply looking at facts.

If these tariffs do come into effect, can the WTO prevent an economic crisis?

ML: No. The WTO is not in a position to stem any global economic decline. It is not a forum where most nations can come together, be honest with one another, and essentially find a solution out of that kind of crisis.

MK: The basic problem is that consensus or decision making by consensus is proving to be a problem. When this issue was discussed in the legal drafting group, two countries opposed voting – India and the U.S. So, if there are reforms to be made on the basis of decision making, we will have to get around the principle of 'consensus'. On the question of dispute settlement, the European Union put forward a proposal on arbitration which has not found universal favour. On trade monitoring, there is no way of forcing countries to somehow disclose the measures they have taken, to the WTO.

At this juncture, is there a complete erosion of the MFN (most-favoured-nation) principle?

MK: The bedrock of the multilateral trading system is Article I, MFN. Free trade agreement (FTA) is an exception to Article I and has to be blessed by the WTO. If you conclude an FTA,



The WTO was expected to perform three functions – the negotiating function, the dispute settlement function, and the trade monitoring function – and it is not performing any of them.

MOHAN KUMAR

the WTO has not done a great job in minutely scrutinising the FTAs.

The tariffs indicate the U.S.'s final withdrawal from the WTO system. Second, they introduce tremendous uncertainty. And finally, they also introduce a certain degree of complexity because I don't know if the U.S. Trade Representative (USTR) has the resources to negotiate with 60 countries all at once. But India has got a first movers advantage [in negotiating a trade deal].

ML: MFN goes back to 1947 with the creation of GATT [General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade]. And that is part of the problem, at least from the U.S.'s standpoint. What has fed the grievances of the Trump administration is the sense that the U.S., perhaps rashly and unilaterally, over many rounds of trade negotiations, lowered its simple average tariffs to a very low level compared to many other countries, including India. Then, when efforts were made to continue tariff liberalisation and expectations were high that other countries would follow suit and lower their tariffs, that didn't happen. The U.S. started stepping away boldly from MFN during the first Trump administration but it was continued by the Biden administration. Section 232 (tariffs on steel and aluminium) and Section 301 (tariffs against China) were maintained by the Biden administration. With Trump 2.0 we have got a much more radical set of circumstances. There is consensus among Democrats and Republicans that MFN has not worked well for the U.S. Countries started negotiating FTAs on an accelerated basis in the late 1990s and early 2000s. And many countries through FTAs were stepping away from MFN. They found it easier to negotiate on tariffs bilaterally than at the WTO.

It has been decades since any consensus was reached on fisheries subsidies, agricultural subsidies, and on public stock holding of grains. India has led the opposition to these agreements. Why is that the case?

MK: While the major players will have to bear the major responsibility of the collapse of the WTO because of just the sheer weight of trade

objected to some things that we should not have objected to.

India cannot do much when it comes to agriculture. This is a politically sensitive area for any government in India. The WTO was callous when it came to India's concerns on agriculture. While the U.S. and the EU were allowed to subsidise so much over the years, India, which relies on domestic production, was limited to a 10% subsidy. India finds itself in a situation where it does not want to negotiate labour standards and environmental protection at the WTO, but is okay to discuss this bilaterally with the EU, the U.K., and maybe even with the U.S. The only explanation I have heard is from a former commerce secretary who said that India wants a certain degree of comfort doing this bilaterally first.

ML: The view in the U.S. is different from the Indian view as to what extent the developed world was ignoring the sensitivities and food security concerns of many developing countries, particularly India's. There are many other developing countries which don't necessarily share India's view. Negotiations collapsed on agriculture and domestic support. It is almost impossible to negotiate bilaterally on subsidies.

There has been a lot of criticism, particularly from the U.S., that the WTO has allowed China to flood the global markets with cheap exports, but simultaneously restricted access to its domestic markets. Would you agree with this assessment?

ML: China is a remarkable challenge globally, economically, and on trade. When China joined the WTO, nobody anticipated how lacking the WTO rules would be in addressing the China challenge and how dominant China would become as an export juggernaut.

MK: When we framed the rules we had no idea of things which do not necessarily violate the WTO rules but which still undermine the integrity of the multilateral trading system. So, for example, there was never any question of looking at excess capacity and how one country, which can produce more than 50% of steel and cement, would suddenly flood the market and distort trade. And trade distorting measures are extremely important to the WTO. But we could not frame the rules for it because we simply did not foresee this.



To listen to the full interview
Scan the code or go to the link
www.thehindu.com



Key Takeaways from the Article

Declining Relevance of the WTO:

- ♦ The WTO, established to ensure global trade stability, is increasingly viewed as ineffective.
- ♦ Its three primary functions — **negotiating trade agreements, dispute resolution, and trade monitoring** — have largely been sidelined.
- ♦ The WTO's inability to address critical issues such as agricultural subsidies, fisheries agreements, and market access has significantly diminished its relevance in global trade.



U.S. Actions and Tariff Measures:

- ♦ The U.S. has raised tariffs on various countries, particularly China, and implemented **Section 232 and Section 301** tariffs on steel, aluminum, and China.
- ♦ These actions bypass WTO mechanisms, reflecting a growing trend of **unilateralism**.
- ♦ The U.S. has criticized WTO's **handling of China's role in global trade**, especially regarding its flooding of markets with cheap exports while restricting access to its domestic market.



164 States and Customs Territories



98% of the world trade



package of agreements that is a set of international rules in the field of trade and protection of intellectual property rights, and on which basis the business of the whole world proceeds



platform for multilateral negotiations and the development of international trade rules, including the reduction of trade barriers



dispute settlement system, the most effective among all international organizations



source of information that ensures transparency in the application of trade policy measures by all Members

● India's Role and Challenges in the WTO:

- ◆ India has been a **vocal critic of some WTO policies**, particularly regarding agriculture and food security.
- ◆ India's concerns about the **fairness of the WTO's agricultural subsidy rules**, which allow developed nations more leeway, have led to stalled negotiations.
- ◆ India has consistently objected to global **labor standards and environmental protections** being discussed within the WTO framework, preferring bilateral negotiations on these issues.

● Impact of WTO's Inaction on Global Trade:

- ◆ The WTO has failed to address the underlying issues of global trade imbalances and unfair practices, particularly by China.
- ◆ The inability to evolve with changing global economic dynamics has led to frustration and calls for reform.

WTO : Agreements

Frame work starts with basic principles

1. GENERAL AGREEMENT ON TARRIFS & TRADE (GATT)
2. GENERAL AGREEMENT ON TRADE IN SERVICES (GATS)
3. TRADE RELATED ASPECTS OF INTELLECTUAL PROPERTY RIGHTS (TRIPS)
4. TRADE RELATED INVESTMENT MEASURES (TRIMS)

TRIPS	TRIMS	GATS
LITERAL WORK	TO FACILITATE INVESTMENTS	MOVEMENT OF PERSONS
ARTISTIC WORK	TO LIBERALIZE WORLD TRADE	AIR TRANSPORT
INDUSTRIAL PROPERTY	TO STRIKE OUT INVESTMENT MEASURES WHICH CAN CREATE HINDRANCE	FINANCIAL SERVICES
	TAKING INTO ACCOUNT NEEDS OF DEVELOPING AND LEAST DEVELOPING COUNTRIES	SHIPPING

Structure of the WTO DSS



Lanjia Saora Tribal Group

- ◆ State - ?
- ◆ Epics -?
- ◆ Other names - ?
- ◆ Other States - ?
- ◆ Language - ?

PICTURE OF THE WEEK

Solace during summer



Women of the Lanjia Saora tribal group dance to celebrate the mango harvest in the Gunupur region of Rayagada district, Odisha. K.R DEEPAK