

The 24th Annual Conference on WTO and China: Celebrating the 25th Anniversary of the China Institute for WTO Studies

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On December 11, 2025, the 24th Annual Conference on WTO and China was successfully held at the University of International Business and Economics (UIBE). It was sponsored by the UIBE and China Society for World Trade Organization Studies (CWTO). It was undertaken by the China Institute for WTO Studies (CIWTO), UIBE and the School of Global Governance at Shanghai University of International Business and Economics (SUIBE). The Network on International Trade and Investment System (NITIS) and *Journal of WTO and China* provided support.

The Annual Conference on WTO and China has been successfully held for the past 24 years, providing a vital platform for Chinese and international experts to discuss issues related to the WTO, such as WTO reform, multilateral economic and trade cooperation, global economic governance, and globalization. As well as offering rich and insightful analysis, the conference has also generated innovative perspectives for both policy formulation and academic research.

The 24th Annual Conference was titled “the Future of the WTO and China’s Evolving Role”. Participants discussed a range of topics in depth, including the future of the multilateral trading system, China’s evolving role in the transformation of the WTO, the geopolitical competition between China and the US, the restructuring of international trade rules, China’s institutional opening-up, and the future of economic globalization.

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More than 20 distinguished guests and renowned scholars attended this conference, including: Baoyin Huang, Chair of the University Council, UIBE; Jianchun Ma, President of CWTO; Xiangchen Zhang, Deputy Director-General of the WTO; Yongjie Li, China's Ambassador to the WTO; Hanlin Zhang, Founding Dean of the CIWTO; Xiaozhun Yi, former Deputy Director-General of the WTO; Quan Chong, former President of CWTO; Lin Xu, former Director-General of the Development Planning Department; Xiankun Lu, Director of the Lekok Center in Geneva, Switzerland; Xiaolin Chai, former Director-General of the World Trade Department, Ministry of Commerce (MOFCOM); Hong Zhao, former Chairperson of the WTO's Appellate Body; Xiaodong Hong, former Director-General of the World Trade Department of MOFCOM; Guohua Yang, former Deputy Director-General, Department of Treaty and Law of MOFCOM; Hongxing Ni, former Director, Agricultural Trade Promotion Center, Ministry of Agriculture; Wenhua Ji, Professor, School of Law, UIBE; Huiyao Wang, President of the Center for China and Globalization (CCG); Shiping Liao, Professor, Beijing Normal University (BNU); Yong Wang, Professor, Peking University; Wei Li, Professor, Renmin University of China (RUC); Zhenxing Luo, Researcher, Chinese Academy of International Trade and Economic Cooperation; Jingdong Liu, Researcher, Institute of International Law of Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS); Siqi Li, Professor, CIWTO, UIBE; Qing Liu, Executive Dean, National Academy of Development and Strategy, RUC; Yuze Luo, Deputy Director, Department of Foreign Economic Research, Development Research Center of the State Council; Yan Dong, Research Fellow, Institute of World Economics and Politics, CASS; Hao Wei, Deputy Dean, School of Economics and Business Administration, BNU; Nianli Zhou, Professor, CIWTO, UIBE; and Chunding Li, Professor and Deputy Dean, College of Economics and Management, China Agricultural University.

I. ANNIVERSARY CELEBRATION AND KEYNOTE SPEECHES

The 25th Anniversary Celebration was presided over by Xinquan Tu, Dean of the CIWTO, UIBE. Professor Tu reviewed the Institute's 25-year journey in

WTO research, talent cultivation, and policy advisory services. He expressed sincere gratitude to everyone who has supported the Institute's development. Emphasizing that the WTO is currently facing unprecedented challenges, he noted that China, as the world's largest trading nation, has become a key pillar of the multilateral trading system. The Institute will continue to fulfil its mission by providing intellectual support for WTO reform and for China's participation in global economic and trade governance.

In his opening speech, Baoyin Huang noted that this year marks both the 30th anniversary of the WTO and the 24th anniversary of China's accession to it. Since joining the WTO, China has become deeply integrated into global economic governance and achieved significant development. As the only key research base designated by the Ministry of Education and named after the WTO, the CIWTO has achieved remarkable results in academic research, think tank development, and talent cultivation over the past 25 years. He expressed hope that the Institute would continue to contribute to China's high-level opening-up and to UIBE's "Double First-class" initiative.

Jianchun Ma stated that the development of the CIWTO symbolises China's evolution from a learner to a proactive contributor to the multilateral trading system. He emphasized that WTO reform is currently at a critical juncture and requires joint efforts from the government, academia, and industry. He also expressed his hope for closer collaboration between the two institutions to advance WTO reform and China's high-level opening-up.

Xiangchen Zhang delivered a video in which he congratulated the Institute on its 25th anniversary. He noted that the establishment of the Institute had demonstrated great foresight, laying a solid foundation for China's integration into the multilateral trading system. Despite the challenges currently facing the WTO, its core values remain unchanged, and reform requires the wisdom and active participation of Chinese scholars.

Hanlin Zhang reflected on the establishment and development of the Institute, thanked all the institutions and individuals who had supported it, and shared his thoughts on globalization and China's evolving role in the world economy.

In another video speech, Yongjie Li, highly commended the Institute's achievements in teaching, research, and talent cultivation. Reviewing China's

recent efforts to uphold the multilateral trading system, she expressed hope that the Institute would continue to nurture professionals with a global vision, expertise, and a strong sense of responsibility.

The keynote session featured speeches by Xiaozhun Yi, Quan Chong, and Lin Xu. Xiaozhun Yi analyzed the fundamental causes of the current deadlock in WTO reform, emphasizing that China should uphold multilateralism, promote win-win cooperation, and propose more open and inclusive reforms.

Quan Chong examined the internal and external environments facing the WTO, emphasizing the importance of maintaining strategic resolve and pushing forward negotiations on key issues such as the moratorium on customs duties on electronic transmissions and the Investment Facilitation for Development Agreement.

Lin Xu reviewed China's trade achievements since its accession to the WTO, emphasizing that institutional opening-up is the key to aligning with international rules. He emphasized the importance of deepening supply-side structural reform and enhancing the effectiveness of industrial policies and subsidy mechanisms.

II. ROUNDTABLE FORUM: CHINA'S ROLE IN WTO REFORM

Amid growing challenges to the multilateral trading system, first session, which is the roundtable forum, moderated by Xiankun Lu, focused on "China's Role in WTO Transformation and China's Proposals for WTO Reform". Experts examined ways in which China could contribute to WTO reform, such as through rule-making, development-oriented initiatives, and institutional innovation.

Xiaolin Chai reviewed China's overall approach to WTO reform, emphasizing the continuity and realism of its proposals. He noted that China formally submitted its WTO reform proposal in 2019, following extensive internal preparation that began in 2018, and that it continued to refine the proposal through consultations with WTO Members and the Secretariat. Chai argued that China's proposal accurately identifies the WTO's key issues, including updating the rules, addressing development concerns, and improving

institutional effectiveness. He highlighted the Investment Facilitation for Development Agreement as an example of how China's reform vision aligns with broader global governance initiatives, demonstrating China's transition from a rule-taker to a rule-shaper.

Hong Zhao highlighted the importance of leadership and expertise in maintaining the multilateral trading system. She argued that institutions alone cannot drive reform without committed leadership and a strong community of professionals dedicated to WTO principles. She emphasized that China should embrace a more proactive leadership role commensurate with its economic strength, while maintaining confidence in multilateral rules. She also highlighted the need to integrate macro-level vision with technical rule-making, and urged China to continue investing in talent development and intellectual capacity to support long-term WTO reform.

Xiaodong Hong argued that development should be the central pillar of WTO reform. He contended that development should extend beyond Special and Differential Treatment (SDT) and aim to ensure that all members, especially developing and least-developed countries, can genuinely benefit from trade. Citing examples such as China's increased market access for exports from developing countries and South-South cooperation initiatives, Hong emphasized that China's substantial domestic market and trade policies geared towards development offer concrete support to developing members. He claimed that this approach would strengthen the legitimacy and sustainability of the multilateral trading system.

Guohua Yang shared his insights on WTO dispute settlement and the Multi-Party Interim Appeal Arbitration Arrangement (MPIA). He explained that, although the MPIA is an interim mechanism, it has played a significant part in maintaining rule-based dispute resolution in the absence of a fully operational Appellate Body. He noted the practical challenges faced by the MPIA, including limited resources and participation, but argued that increasing its accessibility to all members should be a key reform objective. He stressed that restoring a credible and binding dispute settlement mechanism is crucial for the authority of the WTO.

Hongxing Ni discussed agricultural negotiations and their changing significance in the context of WTO reform. He noted that, while agriculture

was once at the core of WTO negotiations, it now faces increased complexity due to concerns about food security, technological change, and the prevalence of small-scale farming in many countries. Ni argued that comprehensive reform in agriculture will require patience, innovation in negotiating frameworks, and greater attention to development realities. He emphasized that China's position has shifted from a defensive stance to a more balanced role, seeking to safeguard domestic interests while contributing constructively to global agricultural reform.

III. CHINA-US GEOPOLITICAL COMPETITION AND RESTRUCTURING OF INTERNATIONAL TRADING SYSTEM

The second session was chaired by Wenhua Ji. The speakers, including Huiyao Wang, Shiping Liao, Yong Wang, Wei Li, Zhenxing Luo, and Jingdong Liu, analyzed the China-US strategic competition, the geopolitical impact on trade rules, and the pathways for cooperation and balanced competition.

Huiyao Wang observed that China-US relations have undergone a structural shift since the US formally identified China as its primary strategic competitor. He noted that US global strategy is increasingly influenced by domestic political and economic factors, resulting in a more inward-looking stance. In this context, he argued that the relationship is more likely to evolve towards managed competition rather than comprehensive confrontation. He emphasized the importance of strengthening cooperation with Asian partners, particularly ASEAN countries, as well as expanding international engagement through investment, green development, and the provision of global public goods.

Shiping Liao analyzed the competition between China and the US from geopolitical and security perspectives, emphasizing that economic tensions cannot be separated from broader ideological and strategic considerations. He claimed that US policy towards China is motivated by concerns over shifts in relative power rather than isolated trade disputes. He suggested that China should avoid being drawn into a confrontational logic and instead pursuing a stable external environment through multilateral diplomacy and regional cooperation.

Yong Wang examined the long-term implications of the rivalry between China and the US for the global economic order. He observed that the US has increasingly securitized economic issues by using industrial policy, export controls, and alliance-based arrangements to reshape global value chains. Emphasizing that globalization is not ending but being restructured, Wang argued that China must actively engage in rule-making, standards-setting, and regional economic frameworks to avoid being marginalized in emerging systems.

From the perspective of international economic law, Wei Li examined the current challenges to international trade rules. He pointed out that the authority and coherence of the multilateral trading system have been weakened by some countries invoking national security or domestic legal priorities to bypass established rules. Li stressed that China should continue to uphold multilateralism by strengthening domestic legal governance, increasing transparency, and making its trade-related policies more predictable.

Zhenxing Luo highlighted the evolution of the global trading system, shifting from a focus on efficiency to one increasingly influenced by security and resilience concerns. He argued that this shift poses significant challenges for open economies. Luo emphasized the need for China to better balance openness with security, and to align trade adjustments with industrial upgrading, in order to strengthen its economic resilience.

Jingdong Liu addressed the issue from macroeconomic and globalization perspectives, noting that globalization has always followed cyclical patterns and that the current slowdown does not signify a reversal of this trend. He argued that a new wave of technological change and industrial restructuring would reshape global production networks. Liu emphasized China's strengths in term of manufacturing capacity, market size, and industrial completeness, and stressed that opening up institutions and pursuing high-quality development are key to leveraging these advantages to exert greater influence over global economic governance.

IV. CHINA'S INSTITUTIONAL OPENING-UP AND THE FUTURE OF ECONOMIC GLOBALIZATION

The third session, chaired by Siqu Li, featured speeches by Qing Liu, Yuze Luo,

Yan Dong, Hao Wei, Nianli Zhou and Chunding Li. They discussed institutional opening-up from macro, meso and micro perspectives, as well as services trade liberalization, import expansion and high-quality economic development.

Qing Liu examined the future of economic globalization, considering the structural and ideological shifts in US economic governance. Tracking the evolution of US economic thought from laissez-faire liberalism to state interventionism and neoliberalism, he argued that the US may now be entering a new phase of policy realignment. Liu observed that rise in protectionism and government intervention reflects the cyclical nature of globalization. Against this backdrop, he emphasized that a new wave of technological transformation would inevitably drive global industrial relocation, and that, given its manufacturing scale, technological momentum, and integrated industrial system, China is well positioned to play a central role in global industrial restructuring over the next decade.

Yuze Luo pointed out that globalization has slowed down considerably since the global financial crisis, and that the authority of international trade rules has weakened. He observed that some economies are increasingly invoking national security and rule reform to circumvent multilateral disciplines, thereby accelerating the fragmentation of the global trading system. Luo argued that China's institutional opening-up should prioritize high-quality openness and treat China-US relations as a key variable. He added that trade, industrial, and opening-up strategies should be better coordinated from a systemic perspective. He emphasized that China should evolve beyond its role of the "world's factory" to become a foundational pillar of global industrial development.

Yan Dong observed that institutional opening-up had entered a new phase. She argued that, rather than passively aligning with existing international rules, China should leverage its domestic industrial practice to help shape emerging global rules. Dong pointed out that current changes in global trade and industrial patterns are increasingly structural and are being driven by technological innovation, financial integration, and policy coordination. She identified the following key priorities: empowering new productive forces, promoting regional and coordinated opening-up, expanding participation in rule-making, and strengthening mechanisms to balance openness with economic security.

Hao Wei analyzed institutional opening-up from the perspective of imports. He observed that China's import dependence and the proportion of its imports that are consumer goods remain relatively low compared to other major economies at a similar stage of development. He argued that increasing imports of high-quality consumer goods and essential intermediate products would optimize China's trade structure, reduce decoupling risks, and reinforce its role as a stabilizing force in the global economy by fostering mutual reliance and collaboration.

Nianli Zhou focused on the liberalization of services trade under high-standard international economic and trade rules. She observed that, despite services accounting for about 70 percent of global GDP, services trade represents only about 20 percent of global trade. This indicates a persistent mismatch between the development of the services sector and services trade liberalization. Zhou argued that non-tariff barriers and institutional barriers remain key constraints on services trade and that the global rules governing services, digital trade, and data flows are undergoing rapid and profound transformation. She emphasized that China's opening-up of the services sector has entered a "deep-water zone", requiring a shift from *ex-ante* approval mechanisms towards more effective in-process and *ex-post* regulation, particularly in areas such as cross-border digital services and data governance.

Chunding Li examined institutional opening-up in the context of high-quality economic development, employing both empirical and model-based analysis. He presented quantitative evidence showing that institutional opening-up has played a statistically significant role in promoting high-quality development in China across dimensions such as innovation, coordination, green growth, openness, and inclusiveness. Using a global computable general equilibrium model, Li further demonstrated that deeper two-way institutional opening-up, particularly when combined with domestic reform, would significantly enhance China's long-term growth potential and welfare outcomes. Li concluded that accelerated institutional opening-up will be crucial in achieving China's development goals for 2035 and 2050.