



BULLETIN

No. 50 (126) • March 30, 2010 • © PISM

COMMENTARY

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Conclusion of Doha Round in 2010: Another Deadline Missed?

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The latest WTO consultations on the Doha Round, conducted on 22–26 March 2010 in Geneva, showed that a new multilateral trade agreement was unlikely to be concluded soon. Without political decisions by the major parties to the negotiations, by the G20 in particular, the conclusion of the Round by the end of 2010 is going to be unfeasible.

Global leaders have been known to adopt ambitious targets, the attainment of which proves much more difficult than originally assumed. A climate agreement, which the UN Climate Change Conference in Copenhagen in December 2009 failed to produce, was one case in point. Another process, overshadowed in the recent two years by the climate negotiations—notably the WTO trade negotiations under the Doha Round—is much the same story.

It is not without a reason that these negotiations, launched in December 2001, have in recent years aroused less and less emotions and hopes for their conclusion. So far, none of the deadlines set for concluding consecutive stages of the negotiation process, or for signing a comprehensive multilateral trade agreement, has been met. The will to speedily complete the Doha Round, which sentiment global leaders have expressed on various occasions (such as at G8 summits), has invariably proved an empty slogan when confronted with the WTO reality. The major parties to the negotiations have been disinclined to make concessions and the hammering out of consecutive elements of a future agreement has proved extremely time-consuming. The entire process has been conspicuous for its roller-coaster pattern: as soon as some progress is made, a stalemate on sensitive issues will cause temporary suspension of the negotiations, followed by a period of reflection and by the resumption—albeit with less enthusiasm—of talks. During the July 2008 ministerial meeting consensus was reached on eighteen out of the twenty issues under discussion, yet the absence of agreement on special safeguard mechanisms in agriculture stalled the process for many months.

Last year brought new declarations concerning the conclusion of the Doha Round. At a G8 summit in L'Aquila it was announced that the WTO negotiations would be completed by the end of 2010. Yet the findings of the recent stocktaking consultations held in Geneva on 22–26 March 2010, dispel hopes for the conclusion of negotiations still this year. Even WTO Director General Pascal Lamy, his official optimism notwithstanding, did not go as far as to assert that the declared deadline would be met. He believes that, given the present status of technical-level work, the completion of the Round by the end of 2010, while feasible, would require political will translated into concrete decisions. In fact, though, as the Trade Negotiations Committee proceeded with their work, differences of position on certain issues proved significant enough to render impossible even the drafting of different options for political arbitration on the contents of agreement. Taking into account slow pace of the WTO negotiation process and low position of a multilateral trade agreement on the major negotiation parties' priority lists, a breakthrough in months immediately ahead is hardly to be counted on.

In July the G20 summit will be held in Toronto. One real challenge might be to include the conclusion of the Doha Round in the G20's agenda. The effects of the G20's 2009 meetings on fighting the economic crisis show that this would be the appropriate forum to take decisions on a range of major issues concerning the global economy, including on international trade negotiations. Given the current stage of the WTO negotiations, the completion of the Doha Round in 2010 requires, first and foremost, that the G20 members take at their Toronto summit ambitious decisions on such matters as more flexible negotiating positions on the reduction of subsidies and agricultural tariffs by the US and the EU, and on the liberalization of access to non-agricultural and services markets in such countries as China, Brazil and India.