

WTO SUMMIT IN DELHI FROM TODAY

India to pitch for greater services trade, less protectionism

Roberto Azevedo, WTO's director general, to attend the event

SUBHAYAN CHAKRABORTY
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The two-day mini ministerial meeting starting Monday, which will bring key member-nations of the World Trade Organization (WTO) here, is expected to see India pitch for greater liberalisation of services trade and stitch a global coalition against growing protectionism.

The summit is being hosted at a time when the United States under the Donald Trump administration has repeatedly questioned the need for the WTO and supported more bypassing of the rules-based WTO regime. "The summit will also be crucial towards generating greater support for issues concerning India, such as a permanent solution to agricultural stockpiling for the purpose of food security," experts said.

However, richer nations led by the European Union and Canada have consistently pushed for newer issues such as global rules for e-commerce, investment facilitation, and rules for small and medium enterprises, promoting gender equality and reducing subsidy on fisheries, among others.

Also, India will be focusing on the need for a quick solution to the issue of appointment of judges to the dispute settlement body (DSB) of the WTO.

"The US has single-handedly and consistently blocked the appointment of judges to the seven-member DSB. Currently, three members have retired and a fourth is set to retire soon," senior trade expert and Jawaharlal Nehru University professor Biswajit Dhar said.

India had repeatedly raised this issue during the earlier ministerial conference of the WTO at Buenos Aires, with commerce and industry minister



TRADE TALKERS REACH INDIA

- 50 nations invited by India for the mini-ministerial
- WTO Director General Robert Azevedo visiting India after February 2017, when he had pushed for e-commerce rules
- Deputy US Trade Representative Dennis Shea to be present, even as Trump administration pushes export subsidy case against India at WTO
- Ministers from BRICS nations of Russia and South Africa to be present
- Visit of trade minister from Indonesia – a key negotiator in the RCEP deal – could push agreement
- Pakistan has refused to participate, referring to the ongoing diplomatic row between the nations
- China, South Korea and Canada, nations with which India has clashed at the WTO recently, will send political representatives

Suresh Prabhu urging swift action.

Multilateral focus

A focus on multilateral issues affecting all members will mean this forum will not be the suitable place to discuss bilateral problems, no matter how pressing, commerce secretary Rita Teotia said.

Nor will it see India dis-

cussing issues such as the US lodging a case against the country earlier this week to the DSB over its export promotion schemes, she added.

While invitations had been extended to about 50 nations, ministerial level delegations have been confirmed from about 10, including Russia, Indonesia, Singapore and South Africa. Other nations will be repre-

mented through political representatives and vice-ministers with the notable exception of Pakistan, which has categorically refused to attend, citing the current tussle over diplomatic personnel between the two nations.

India will have meetings with Indonesia, a crucial player in the current negotiations on the proposed Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership, sources said, adding meetings on India's engagement with the BRICS grouping may also take place with delegations from those countries.

The US will be represented by Dennis Shea, the Deputy United States Trade Representative and Chief of Mission at WTO headquarters in Geneva.

Azevedo's visit

WTO Director General Roberto Azevedo will undoubtedly remain the most important dignitary from Geneva. His earlier visit to India, in February 2017, was marked by a tussle over whether the global trade community should adopt a set of proposed rules on e-commerce. Richer nations led by the US backed the idea while India had been dead against it.

Azevedo had thrown his weight behind the rules, saying discussion on the matter would move forward apart from having discussion with the government in Delhi, he also attended meetings with e-commerce players, where several indicated that they were apprehensive of losing out on the opportunity of global major investing in them.

"India and Azevedo are on the same side with regard to recent developments that have shaken global trade such as the US' imposition of high steel and aluminum tariffs and constant threat of a trade war," a senior commerce ministry official said.