

'The starting point: the Tokyo Declaration' from Le Monde (17 January 1978)


Caption: On 17 January 1978, French daily newspaper Le Monde describes the strong points of successive negotiations on international trade since the entry into force, in 1948, of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT).

Source: Le Monde. dir. de publ. FAUVET, Jacques. 17.01.1978, n° 10 253. Paris: Le Monde. "Le point de départ: la déclaration de Tokyo", p. 20.

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The starting point: the Tokyo Declaration

The General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade, better known by the initials GATT, is a multilateral treaty signed by more than 80 countries, who together account for over four fifths of world trade. This agreement entered into force in 1948 with the aim of liberalising world trade and providing it with a solid foundation. GATT is, generally speaking, the only multilateral body authorised to set negotiated rules for world trade.

For the past 30 years, GATT, or rather its Secretariat based in Geneva, has been the leading body for negotiating the removal of trade barriers and the management of international trade relations. In addition to creating a body of rules, GATT also acts as a forum in which countries may resolve their trade problems. Several multilateral trade conferences have been held at the GATT headquarters since the end of World War II. The Kennedy Round, which began in Geneva in 1964 and ended in 1967, managed to reduce customs duties levied on industrial goods by around one third.

Uninterrupted growth in world trade, which has increased eightfold since the end of World War II, is proof of GATT's success. However, the growing number of restrictive sectoral agreements entered into by GATT signatories, who, in so doing, have yielded to protectionist tendencies, has called the established order into question.

In September 1973, during a ministerial meeting held in Tokyo, an agreement was reached to initiate new trade negotiations that would go farther than any previous ones. That decision was given tangible form in the Tokyo Declaration, which defined the scope of negotiations. They were to cover *'non-tariff barriers and other measures which impede or distort international trade in both industrial and agricultural products, including tropical products and raw materials, whether in primary form or at any stage of processing.'* The Declaration also emphasised the importance of including in the negotiations products whose export is of particular interest to the developing countries, in addition to measures that have an impact on their trade. Negotiations between the developed countries must be based on reciprocity, i.e. they have to grant concessions equivalent to those they secure. Moreover, developed countries should not expect developing countries to make contributions that are incompatible with the requirement of the development of their finances and their trade.

A trade negotiating committee serves as the framework for the discussions that entered their active phase in February 1975. The committee comprises representatives of all the countries taking part in the Tokyo Round and currently has 97 members. Together, they account for nine tenths of world trade and include all the developed countries with market economies, around 77 developing countries, of which 20 or so are not GATT members, and several Eastern European countries. The task of supervising the negotiations proper goes to seven negotiating groups that are open to all interested participants. The groups cover the major areas identified in the Tokyo Declaration: customs duties, non-tariff measures, the sectoral approach, safeguards, agriculture, tropical products and improvements to the international system governing world trade. Two of these groups have, in turn, created a number of specialist sub-groups.