

EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW



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H.E. Ali Sarfraz Hussain

Ambassador and Permanent Representative of Pakistan to the World Trade Organization (WTO) - Geneva

ICMA: How can Pakistan's tariff reforms revive industries while staying aligned with WTO rules?

H.E. Ali Sarfraz Hussain: Pakistan has always remained compliant with WTO rules but can use available flexibilities to support industrial growth. The country can employ a combination of subsidies and tariff tools to support industrial development. This can include reducing the cost of inputs by lowering tariffs and providing calibrated and time-bound protection for strategically selected industries by utilizing the “water” (the gap between bound and currently applied tariffs). Competitiveness can be further supported by providing export subsidies to priority industries, which are currently allowed only to certain developing countries, including Pakistan, under WTO rules.

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ICMA: What role does Pakistan's WTO Mission play in shaping trade policies and supporting industrial growth?

H.E. Ali Sarfraz Hussain: This Mission plays a vital role in aligning our trade policy with the multilateral trading system while safeguarding the country's economic and strategic interests. We provide legal and technical input for trade policy decisions, report policy measures through notifications, facilitate technical assistance and capacity-building support, and represent Pakistan in trade disputes. We also assist in trade remedial measures, such as anti-dumping, to protect domestic industries from unfair trade practices.

Moreover, the Mission, in consultation with national stakeholders, develops proposal papers for negotiations on key priority areas and attempts to build consensus on these proposals to advance Pakistan's national interests. For example, we are actively working to secure greater policy flexibility to strengthen resilience against crises such as floods, and to establish a global discipline to reduce the cost of inward remittances below 3 percent.

ICMA: How do you balance Pakistan's agricultural needs with global trade obligations as WTO Agriculture Chair?

H.E. Ali Sarfraz Hussain: The Committee on Agriculture Special Sessions (CoA SS) is mandated to negotiate further disciplines on agriculture. An ambassador from Pakistan has been elected as the Chair of this negotiation committee for the first time in the WTO. As the Chair works in a personal capacity, I am expected to maintain neutrality and facilitate constructive negotiations to help members reach consensus on new disciplines. Meanwhile,

Pakistan's agricultural interests are represented by the Deputy Permanent Representative (DPR) and the Agriculture Counsellor, in line with the national stance developed through stakeholder consultations.

ICMA: How has Pakistan's WTO Mission contributed to addressing recent U.S. reciprocal tariffs?

H.E. Ali Sarfraz Hussain: The Mission has actively been working by providing detailed technical and legal input, along with policy options, for the government's consideration in addressing reciprocal tariffs imposed by the United States.

ICMA: What steps can Pakistan take at the WTO to boost export opportunities for key industries?

H.E. Ali Sarfraz Hussain: First, we need to ensure fair market access, in line with the Most Favoured Nation (MFN) obligations and WTO rules. We do so by raising specific trade concerns or even disputes in case of any MFN violations or inconsistent non-tariff measures.

Second, we must help the industry produce quality products by meeting global standards. For this purpose, we arrange technical support for regulatory agencies to build their capacity so they can enforce international standards.

Third, we have to work to ensure that standards are not used adversely as protective measures. For example, to safeguard existing market access, Pakistan has been raising concerns over Trade Related Environmental Measures which constitute emerging non-tariff barriers.

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Fourth, we need to look at unexplored opportunities. For example, Pakistan is pursuing enhanced market access for its services sector under Mode 4 in developed markets, creating much needed employment opportunities abroad.

Fifth, we need to be active in emerging issues of our time to ensure that rules which restrict our access are not developed. In this effort, we remain actively engaged in WTO discussions on digital trade and emerging technologies, including Artificial Intelligence, to ensure that developing countries retain flexibility in shaping their regulatory frameworks for their development.

ICMA: How can WTO discussions on agriculture strengthen Pakistan's agro-based industries?

H.E. Ali Sarfraz Hussain: The current negotiations on agriculture mainly aim to provide additional flexibilities for developing countries in areas such as public stockholding and safeguard measures in response to import surges to ensure both food security and livelihood security. These flexibilities would help Pakistan and other developing countries strengthen their farm and livestock sectors. Moreover, the ongoing negotiations seek commitments from members that provide high levels of domestic support to reduce trade-distorting subsidies and simplify tariff structures. A positive outcome of these negotiations would create fairer and more open international markets for Pakistan's agro processed products.

ICMA: What challenges does Pakistan face at the WTO in achieving fairer tariffs?

H.E. Ali Sarfraz Hussain: The WTO's Most Favoured Nation (MFN) principle requires members to apply uniform tariff rates to all trading partners, meaning

Pakistani exports are subject to the same tariffs as those from its competitive economies. While 72% of global trade still operates under the MFN rule, progress in reducing bound tariff rates has stalled due to a lack of consensus among WTO members. Meanwhile, the growing trend of bilateral and regional trade agreements allows many of Pakistan's competitors to gain preferential access to major markets, putting Pakistan at a disadvantage. To address this challenge, Pakistan is actively pursuing Free Trade Agreements (FTAs) with its key trading partners at the bilateral level, following inclusive consultations with stakeholders, to secure competitive market access.

ICMA: What outcomes at the 14th WTO Ministerial Conference in March 2026 would most benefit Pakistan's economy?

H.E. Ali Sarfraz Hussain: The 14th WTO Ministerial Conference is expected to be challenging due to rising global trade tensions and differing priorities among members. Despite this, several potential outcomes could significantly benefit Pakistan's economy. These include decisions aimed at strengthening food security and rural livelihoods, and providing greater policy flexibility to respond to natural disasters. Other key outcomes could involve reducing the cost of remittance transfer, improving market access for services, enhancing technical assistance for developing countries, and increasing flexibility in intellectual property rules to promote innovation and technology transfer.

The Editorial Board thanks H.E. Ali Sarfraz Hussain, Ambassador and Permanent Representative of Pakistan to the World Trade Organization (WTO) – Geneva for sparing his precious time to give an exclusive interview for Chartered Management Accountant Journal.