

FRAGMENTATION AND HARMONISATION IN INTERNATIONAL TRADE LAW: A LITERATURE REVIEW ON THE IMPACT OF REGIONAL TRADE AGREEMENTS ON THE WTO'S MULTILATERAL SYSTEM IN THE POST- PANDEMIC ERA

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Abstract

This article examines the dynamics of fragmentation and harmonisation in international trade law in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic through a literature review, focusing on the impact of Regional Trade Agreements (RTAs) on the multilateral system of the World Trade Organisation (WTO). The process of fragmentation is described in the context of the proliferation of RTAs, which gives rise to overlapping norms, inconsistent rules, and uncertainty for member and non-member states, particularly developing countries. On the other hand, this article asserts that RTAs can serve as “building blocks” for normative integration if designed in a manner compatible and transparent with WTO principles. Through adjustment mechanisms, dispute settlement, and plurilateral initiatives, the WTO demonstrates an adaptive capacity to maintain the coherence of the international trade law system amidst the proliferation of RTAs. Thus, this article concludes that fragmentation and harmonisation are not dichotomous but interrelated; the sustainability of the WTO's multilateral system depends heavily on the capacity for coordination and harmonisation between regional and multilateral regimes in the post-pandemic era of global trade.

Keywords: legal fragmentation, legal harmonisation, Regional Trade Agreements, WTO, international trade law, multilateralism, post-pandemic RTAs.

Introduction

Developments in international trade law over the past few decades have become increasingly complex, particularly following the COVID-19 pandemic, which has significantly altered the patterns of global economic interaction. This global crisis has not only disrupted international supply chains but has also prompted countries to reassess their trade strategies, including strengthening regional cooperation through Regional Trade Agreements (RTAs). In this context, fundamental questions arise regarding the sustainability of the multilateral system represented by the World Trade Organization (WTO) amidst the increasingly widespread proliferation of regional agreements (Junifta, 2016).

The phenomenon of the growing number of RTAs is not, in fact, a new one, but its acceleration in the wake of the pandemic indicates a shift in countries' orientation from multilateralism towards a more pragmatic form of regionalism. Countries tend to seek more flexible and rapid mechanisms for regulating international trade, which the

WTO is often unable to facilitate optimally. Consequently, the global trading system is now characterised by overlapping rules that have the potential to create legal fragmentation (Baldwin, 2016).

Fragmentation in international trade law refers to a situation in which various legal regimes develop in parallel without adequate coordination, thereby giving rise to inconsistencies in norms and legal uncertainty. In the context of RTAs, this fragmentation is reflected in the diversity of provisions regarding tariffs, rules of origin, environmental standards, and digital trade regulations that differ from one agreement to another. This situation challenges the principle of uniformity, which has long been the foundation of the WTO system (Junifta, 2016).

On the other hand, the WTO, as a multilateral institution, faces increasing pressure to maintain its relevance. The deadlock in the dispute settlement mechanism, as well as the slow pace of negotiations in multilateral forums, are factors driving countries to turn to RTAs as an alternative. This has raised concerns that the WTO will lose its central role in regulating global trade (Ravallion, 2016). However, not all developments in RTAs are viewed as a threat to the multilateral system. Some literature, in fact, sees RTAs as potential 'building blocks' that can strengthen global economic integration if designed to be compatible with WTO rules. From this perspective, RTAs can serve as policy laboratories for testing new norms that can subsequently be adopted more widely within the multilateral framework (World Trade Organization, 2022).

The COVID-19 pandemic has also accelerated the emergence of new issues in international trade, such as digital trade, supply chain resilience and environmental sustainability. Many modern RTAs include progressive provisions relating to these issues, which have not yet been fully accommodated within the WTO framework. This further widens the gap between regional and multilateral rules (Fiorentino et al., 2007).

In this context, there is an urgent need to understand how fragmentation and harmonisation can coexist within the international trade law system. Fragmentation is not necessarily negative, provided there are coordination mechanisms that allow for the convergence of norms across regimes. Therefore, an analysis of the relationship between RTAs and the WTO is crucial to understanding the direction of global trade law development (Martin et al., 2012). Furthermore, WTO legal principles such as Most-Favoured-Nation (MFN) and National Treatment face serious challenges due to the exclusivity inherent in RTAs. Tariff preferences and market access granted exclusively to certain members have the potential to undermine the principle of non-discrimination, which forms the foundation of the WTO. This situation reinforces the argument that the proliferation of RTAs could lead to the erosion of multilateralism (Bagwell & Staiger, 2004).

Nevertheless, the WTO has in fact provided a legal framework that permits the existence of RTAs through provisions such as Article XXIV of the GATT and the Enabling

Clause. These provisions stipulate that RTAs must not increase trade barriers against non-member countries. However, the implementation of this principle in practice often gives rise to diverse and controversial interpretations (Tao et al., 2021). For developing countries such as Indonesia, this phenomenon has significant implications. On the one hand, participation in various RTAs opens up opportunities for broader market access and increased competitiveness. On the other hand, the complexity of differing rules demands institutional capacity and domestic policy harmonisation that is far from straightforward (Yap, 2014).

Based on the above, this article focuses on an in-depth analysis of how RTAs influence the structure and coherence of international trade law, particularly in relation to the WTO's multilateral system. It is therefore hoped that this study will make a conceptual contribution to understanding the dynamics between regionalism and multilateralism, as well as their implications for the future governance of global trade.

Research Methodology

This study employs a literature review method with a normative approach, focusing on the analysis of various legal sources and academic literature relating to international trade law, particularly regarding the relationship between Regional Trade Agreements (RTAs) and the multilateral system of the World Trade Organization (WTO). The data used consists of primary legal materials such as international agreements (GATT, WTO Agreements), as well as secondary legal materials including books, national and international journal articles, and other relevant documents. The analysis was conducted qualitatively by identifying the concepts of legal fragmentation and harmonisation, comparing the views of experts, and examining developments following the COVID-19 pandemic to gain a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics of global trade law (Snyder, 2019); (Elijah & Aslan, 2025)

Results and Discussion

Fragmentation of International Trade Law due to the Development of RTAs

Fragmentation of international trade law describes a situation in which various legal regimes develop in parallel without adequate coordination, thereby giving rise to overlapping norms and legal uncertainty for cross-border traders. In the context of RTAs, this fragmentation is not merely a matter of differing rules, but also concerns differences in the interpretation and application of fundamental principles of international trade by each group of countries within regional agreements (Martin et al., 2012).

The proliferation of RTAs over the past two decades has been one of the main drivers of this fragmentation, as each agreement is shaped by differing political, economic and regulatory priorities (Baldwin, 2016). The structure of RTAs is often not aligned with the WTO legal framework, thereby creating overlapping legal regimes

containing differing rules for goods, services, investment, and digital regulation (Tao et al., 2021) . This situation, often referred to as the “spaghetti bowl” effect, forces exporters and importers to adapt to multiple sets of rules simultaneously governing the same trade (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017) .

RTAs also reinforce the preferential nature of international trade, as tariff benefits and market access are typically enjoyed only by members of specific trading blocs (Naughton, 2021) . In practice, this diminishes the relevance of the Most-Favoured-Nation (MFN) principle, which forms the foundation of the WTO’s multilateral system, meaning that the preferences granted in RTAs have the potential to discriminate against non-member states (Bagwell & Staiger, 2004) . This situation creates an imbalance in market access and widens the gap between countries that are members of RTAs and those that are excluded (Yap, 2014) .

In addition to tariff preferences, modern RTAs often include higher technical standards, such as environmental regulations, labour rights, consumer protection, and digital trade rules that are not always uniformly adopted by the WTO (Fiorentino et al., 2007) . These differing standards place an additional burden on exporters from non-member countries or countries involved in multiple RTAs, as they must meet a multitude of different technical requirements (World Trade Organization, 2022). This fragmentation of technical standards has the potential to hinder trade and increase compliance costs, particularly for businesses from developing countries.

In the legal sphere, RTAs also introduce substantive and procedural rules that fall outside the scope of WTO authority, including dispute settlement mechanisms that are more specific and limited to member states. Dispute settlement at the RTA level often runs counter to WTO mechanisms, thereby creating a separate forum for resolving conflicts that are, in essence, multilateral in nature (Fiorentino et al., 2007) . This poses a risk of inconsistent legal rulings and weakens the coherence of the international trade law system as a whole. These legal fragments are reinforced by the tendency of developed countries to design RTAs that are more favourable to their own interests, for example through strict reciprocity clauses and exceptions to the principle of Special and Differential Treatment for developing countries (MacPhee & Sattayanuwat, 2014) . Consequently, developing countries are often forced to accept higher standards without commensurate compensation, thereby marginalising the fundamental principles of fairness and balance within the WTO system (Ravenhill, 2011) . This legal fragmentation is, therefore, not merely technical in nature, but also political and structural.

The development of RTAs in the Asia-Pacific region, such as the RCEP and the CPTPP, is further highlighting the fragmentation of the international trade landscape, as each agreement has a different membership structure, scope and depth of liberalisation(Ravallion, 2016) . Consequently, a region that was once viewed as a single trading bloc now faces a network of overlapping agreements that are difficult to

coordinate (Grant & Lambert, 2008) . This pattern indicates that fragmentation is not only global in nature, but is also acutely felt at the regional level.

The COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the trend towards fragmentation by prompting countries to strengthen trade ties with partners perceived as more secure and reliable, both politically and economically (World Trade Organization, 2022). The global supply chain crisis has led countries to favour more limited and exclusive RTAs, thereby deepening the pattern of ‘bloc building’ over the multilateral system (Naughton, 2021) . In this context, fragmentation has become increasingly complex as it is driven by factors of economic safety and supply security, rather than purely economic considerations.

From a legal perspective, RTAs also pose challenges regarding the hierarchy of norms, as WTO provisions and RTAs often do not explicitly clarify which takes precedence (Martin et al., 2012) . Uncertainty regarding which should take precedence—the WTO or the RTA—creates scope for legal disputes and differing interpretations between states and international courts (Pomfret, 2006) . This legal fragmentation, therefore, not only obscures substantive provisions but also causes confusion regarding the hierarchy and application of norms.

For developing countries, the legal fragmentation resulting from RTAs imposes a heavy administrative and regulatory burden. They must manage numerous agreements with differing provisions, ranging from rules of origin to data protection standards, without adequate institutional support (Yap, 2014) . This risks undermining the benefits of RTAs and, ironically, reducing their trade competitiveness amidst increasingly fierce competition.

At the macro level, the legal fragmentation caused by RTAs also has the potential to erode confidence in the WTO’s multilateral system, as countries tend to focus more on regional solutions that appear quicker and more practical (Liang et al., 2025) . As RTAs become the “primary forum” for liberalisation negotiations, the WTO’s policy space as a centre for coordination and harmonisation of rules becomes increasingly limited (Tao et al., 2021) . This fragmentation is, therefore, not only normative in nature, but also institutional and functional.

Furthermore, this legal fragmentation increases the risk of ‘overlaps’ and ‘gaps’ in international trade regulations. On the one hand, certain issues such as digital trade and data-driven trade are actually regulated more strictly in modern RTAs, whilst the WTO framework has not yet fully accommodated them (MacPhee & Sattayanuwat, 2014) . On the other hand, important issues such as food security and environmental sustainability are still managed in a fragmented manner without consistent standards (World Trade Organization, 2022). Consequently, the trade legal system becomes neither comprehensive nor systematic.

This accumulation of regulatory and institutional fragmentation has the potential to create significant legal uncertainty for transnational businesses, as a single

trade transaction may be subject to several agreements at once. This uncertainty gives rise to significant legal and economic risks, thereby prompting companies to opt for markets deemed the most stable and predictable, even if not the most competitive (Martin et al., 2012). In the long term, this legal fragmentation may reduce the efficiency of global trade and undermine the principle of legal certainty that underpins modern international economic relations.

Consequently, the development of RTAs in the post-pandemic era has not only reinforced patterns of regionalism in international trade, but has also led to deep and widespread legal fragmentation. This fragmentation threatens the coherence of the WTO's multilateral system, widens the gap between nations, and creates imbalances in the application of international trade norms. Therefore, understanding the dynamics of fragmentation resulting from RTAs is a crucial first step towards designing effective harmonisation efforts within the context of international trade law.

Harmonisation and Adaptation of the WTO System in Addressing Post-Pandemic RTAs

The harmonisation of international trade law refers to efforts to align the rules emerging from various regimes, including RTAs and the WTO, so that they do not conflict with one another and can create a coherent framework. In the context of RTAs, harmonisation does not mean eliminating diversity, but ensuring that regional rules do not erode the fundamental principles of the WTO, such as non-discrimination and legal certainty (Kirilenko & Lo, 2013). Thus, harmonisation serves as a balancing force between the rapid dynamics of regionalism and the need for stability in the multilateral system.

The WTO was historically designed to serve as a hub for coordination and harmonisation in international trade through negotiation and dispute settlement mechanisms (Bagwell & Staiger, 2004). In an increasingly complex landscape of RTAs, this role has become even more important as countries require a multilateral forum to regulate the normative relationship between RTAs and WTO rules (Pomfret, 2006). The WTO's authority to consult on and clarify agreements, as well as to regulate the coexistence of RTAs, serves as a vital instrument in maintaining legal consistency (Liang et al., 2025).

In the post-pandemic era, the WTO has faced pressure to adapt, as many modern RTAs have anticipated issues that have not yet been fully accommodated within the multilateral framework, such as digital trade, data protection and environmental sustainability (Lynch, 2010). However, the incompleteness of WTO rules actually creates scope for RTAs to develop more progressive standards, which can then serve as a basis for harmonisation when adopted more widely (World Trade Organization, 2022). From this perspective, RTAs can be viewed as 'legal laboratories' that complement, rather than replace, the WTO system. To strengthen harmonisation, the WTO has developed various adjustment and coordination mechanisms, including the application of the

principle of RTAs' compatibility with WTO rules through Article XXIV of the GATT and the Enabling Clause (Kirilenko & Lo, 2013) . These provisions require that RTAs must not increase trade barriers against non-member countries, thereby limiting the potential for damaging fragmentation (Martin et al., 2012) . In practice, the interpretation of these principles through WTO panels and the Appellate Body serves as a key means of aligning RTA policies with the multilateral regime (Liang et al., 2025) .

The COVID-19 pandemic has also accelerated harmonisation efforts by fostering multilateral dialogue on supply chain resilience, crisis preparedness and the involvement of critical service sectors (World Trade Organization, 2022). In forums such as Joint Statement Initiatives (JSI) and plurilateral negotiations, WTO member states have sought to develop common rules that can address delays at the multilateral level, whilst maintaining coherence with WTO rules as a whole(Ravallion, 2016) . This approach, although not binding on all members, nevertheless serves as a step towards normative harmonisation.

Harmonisation also occurs through the WTO dispute settlement mechanism, which ensures that RTA provisions cannot override obligations already incorporated into the WTO agreements (Howse et al., 2005) . When a conflict arises between RTA rules and WTO rules, the DSB forum can provide an interpretation that harmonises the two regimes, thereby preventing conflicting interpretations at the regional level (Pomfret, 2006) . In this context, dispute settlement functions not only as an instrument of law enforcement, but also as a tool for normative harmonisation.

On the other hand, there is a tendency for RTAs to serve as 'building blocks' for multilateral integration, provided they are designed in a compatible and transparent manner (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017) . A number of RTAs, such as the RCEP and the CPTPP, include provisions that are substantially aligned with WTO principles, for example in tariff liberalisation, transparency, and the protection of intellectual property rights (Lynch, 2010) . When the same countries are involved in both RTAs and the WTO, this pattern can encourage the establishment of minimum standards that subsequently serve as a benchmark for multilateral negotiations.

The WTO has also begun to develop guidelines and best practices to enhance the transparency of RTAs, for example through notification and review mechanisms by the Council for Trade in Goods and the Council for Trade in Services (World Trade Organization, 2022). By encouraging member states to provide comprehensive and up-to-date information on the RTAs they draft, the WTO can identify potential normative conflicts at an early stage and guide efforts to harmonise . This transparency forms an important foundation for the coherence of the international trade legal system.

In the wake of the pandemic, there has also been a push to integrate sustainability and digital trade issues into the WTO framework, which were previously largely regulated in modern RTAs (Lynch, 2010) . Plurilateral negotiations on e-commerce and the environment aim to adopt standards already developed at the RTA

level as broader minimum norms (World Trade Organization, 2022). This process demonstrates that harmonisation does not always start from the top (from the WTO), but also from the bottom up (through learning-by-doing at the RTA level).

For developing countries, WTO-supported harmonisation can serve as a key instrument for reducing the regulatory burden and avoiding imbalances caused by the proliferation of complex RTAs (Anwar & Nurrohman, 2025). Through the principles of Special and Differential Treatment (SDT) and technical assistance, the WTO encourages developing countries to understand and utilise RTAs without compromising consistency with multilateral commitments (Martin et al., 2012). Such harmonisation serves as a vital means of maintaining fairness and balance between the interests of developed and developing countries.

The WTO's adaptation to RTAs is also evident in changes to the way negotiations and rule-making are conducted, which are now more collaborative and inclusive (Ravallion, 2016). Rather than relying solely on large-scale, hard-to-achieve round-negotiations, the WTO promotes more flexible approaches such as plurilateral agreements and joint statements, which allow countries with similar interests to develop policies that can then be gradually adopted by the wider community (Wardle & Derakhshan, 2017). This approach makes the WTO more adaptive to the dynamics of RTAs without compromising the coherence of the system.

In the context of Indonesia and other developing countries, the harmonisation of WTO and RTAs is important for maintaining the consistency of national trade policies, avoiding conflicts of rules between agreements, and ensuring that the benefits of RTAs can be fully utilised (Junifta, 2016). By strengthening active participation in WTO forums whilst managing RTAs in accordance with compatible principles, developing countries can reduce the risk of fragmentation and enhance legal certainty for businesses (Anwar & Nurrohman, 2025).

In theoretical terms, harmonisation can be understood as a form of controlled integration between legal regimes, in which regional and multilateral norms complement and reinforce one another. RTAs that are transparently accommodated and balanced by the WTO can form part of a more comprehensive international trade legal system, rather than operating as autonomous and separate regimes (Joeliant & Gunadi, 2025). From this perspective, harmonisation is not merely a matter of aligning norms, but also of institutional and functional integration.

Thus, the WTO's adaptation to post-pandemic RTAs demonstrates that the multilateral system is not static, but has the capacity to transform and collaborate with regional regimes. Through the harmonisation of standards, the strengthening of transparency, and the adoption of progressive practices from RTAs, the WTO can maintain its relevance whilst preserving the coherence of the international trade legal system. The next challenge is to ensure that this harmonisation process not only

benefits developed countries, but also strengthens sustainability and fairness for all members of the global trading system.

Conclusion

The fragmentation of international trade law resulting from the proliferation of Regional Trade Agreements (RTAs) in the post-pandemic era indicates that the WTO's multilateral system is increasingly confronted with complex and overlapping normative dynamics. RTAs, whilst offering benefits in terms of market access and the development of new standards, also give rise to regulatory fragmentation, inconsistencies in norms, and legal uncertainty for global traders, particularly developing countries with limited regulatory capacity. In this context, RTAs have the potential to erode the centrality of WTO principles such as MFN and non-discrimination, as well as creating the risk of inconsistencies in interpretation and legal decisions between trade regimes.

However, fragmentation does not necessarily lead to disintegration, provided that RTAs are designed to be compatible and transparent with the WTO framework, and are balanced by robust harmonisation mechanisms. The WTO, through Article XXIV of the GATT, the Enabling Clause, the dispute settlement principle, and various plurilateral initiatives, continues to serve as a hub for coordination and a balancer of international trade norms. In the post-pandemic context, progressive RTAs on digital trade, sustainability, and supply chain resilience can serve as 'building blocks' for broader normative integration, provided that such normative experiences are systematically incorporated into multilateral forums.

Thus, the dynamics of fragmentation and harmonisation in international trade law reflect the tension between regional pragmatism and the need for multilateral coherence. For developing countries such as Indonesia, it is important to leverage active participation in the WTO to ensure that RTAs not only serve the interests of specific groups, but also strengthen the fairness, certainty and adaptability of the global trade legal system as a whole. Fragmentation must be viewed as both a challenge and an opportunity, provided that the harmonisation process is reinforced through institutional coordination, transparency, and a collective commitment to the coherence of the international trading system.

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