

Policy Dialogue on Doha Issues and the Contemporary Trade Agenda

Singapore, 5-7 October 2011

Opening Remarks by Patrick Low, Chief Economist, WTO

Minister Lee Yi Shyan, Vice-Dean Simon Chesterman, Ambassadors, Participants from Asian countries in the Dialogue, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It gives me great pleasure, on behalf of the WTO, to welcome you all here today to our joint venture with the Faculty of Law, and the Centre for International Law, NUS. I should like to begin by sincerely thanking our NUS partners in this dialogue, who have done so much organizationally and through in-kind and financial contributions to make this event possible.

I have a feeling we are going to enjoy three days of stimulating conversation from which we will all learn something. This dialogue, aimed at senior officials from the Asia region, is basically an exploration of two separate but closely related issues. First, the Dialogue will take stock of the current situation with respect to the Doha Round. Second, we shall be looking at aspects of the contemporary trade agenda.

Unlike the Doha Round, where we have negotiating mandates, we do not have any agreed definition of the contemporary trade agenda. For this dialogue, we have selected some issues that we consider relevant; these are the evolution of regionalism and preferential trade arrangements, the relationship between

climate change and trade policy, trade in natural resources, non-tariff barriers to trade, commodity trade, food security and food prices. I should like to emphasize at the outset that the selection of these issues for the Dialogue does not imply that there are no other issues. There will be opportunities during the Dialogue to raise other issues if any of you believe this is necessary. I should also say that the order in which issues have been placed on the programme implies no judgement as to their relative importance.

As far as the state of the Doha Round is concerned, I must say that in the 30 years plus that I have been involved in one way or another with the GATT/WTO, I do not think I have seen a situation in which a negotiation seems quite as stuck as this one. I wonder how many governments or commentators truly believe that in the foreseeable future, the Doha Round can be completed in its current configuration. Yet it is still a minority fringe view that argues for explicit abandonment of the Doha Round. If that remains a very minoritarian and fringe view, and not one, incidentally, that has been expressed by any government, then we have a big challenge before us -- how to take what is useful and realizable from this negotiation and also move on with other issues that will increasingly demand international cooperation at the global level. Another question worth pondering, independently of the specificities of particular issues, is this: what would international trade relations look like without that anchor, that mainstay, of a global framework for cooperation.

What would the policy world look like without a WTO? Governments would most probably want to set about establishing a new WTO. These, then, are some of the issues that we shall be addressing.

In thinking about the Doha Round and its implications for international trade cooperation, there is one very important point that needs to be emphasized. It is that the WTO is not just the Doha Round. The WTO is much more than that. We should remember that the WTO is a system of rules (an inter-governmental contract), a mechanism for settling disputes, and a vehicle for transparency and policy dialogue, as well as a negotiating forum. And as a negotiating forum it is not just the Doha Round. So a struggling Doha Round is no reason to despair of the WTO. That would be a costly mistake of historical proportions.

We are very fortunate to have such distinguished panellists for our discussions over the next few days. The five panellists in the first substantive session, for example, comprises what I would guess to be well over a century of accumulated policy experience in the trade field. This expertise emanates from China, the European Union, India, Japan and the United States -- all large, key players in the multilateral trading system. We are very fortunate to have these eminent individuals with us today. Then we also have an array of intellectual firepower from other panels, mostly from the academic sector. Here we are fortunate as well. Last but by no means least, we have senior trade policy specialists from around the region from whom I am confident we shall also

learn a lot, and who I hope will individually also take something away from this meeting. We have deliberately structured the sessions so as to provide time for the debate from the floor, and we hope this will be amply taken advantage of.

Thank you very much.