

## DECOLONISING GLOBAL TRADE TARIFFS: INDONESIA'S STRATEGY IN RESPONSE TO THE WTO'S 1.8% PROJECTION FOR 2026

**Gunawan Widjaja**

Senior Lecturer, Faculty of Law Universitas 17 Agustus 1945 Jakarta  
[widjaja\\_gunawan@yahoo.com](mailto:widjaja_gunawan@yahoo.com)

**Nofianty Helyo**

Student Faculty of Law Universitas 17 Agustus 1945 Jakarta  
[nofiahelyo11@gmail.com](mailto:nofiahelyo11@gmail.com)

### Abstract

This article discusses the decolonisation of global trade tariffs as a conceptual and practical strategy for Indonesia in response to the WTO's projection of a 1.8% slowdown in global trade by 2026. This study highlights that the global tariff system is not entirely neutral, but rather still reflects historical inequalities that favour developed nations and place developing nations in a subordinate position within the international value chain. Using a literature review approach, this article outlines two main focuses: the deconstruction of tariff inequalities in the global economy and Indonesia's response strategies through export market diversification, industrial downstreaming, domestic market protection, and economic diplomacy. The findings indicate that tariff decolonisation is not merely a normative agenda, but also a strategic instrument for strengthening economic sovereignty, enhancing national competitiveness, and expanding Indonesia's development policy space amidst global trade uncertainty.

**Keywords:** tariff decolonisation; global trade; WTO 2026; economic inequality; Indonesia's strategy.

### Introduction

Global trade in 2026 is projected to face a significant slowdown, and the WTO's growth forecast of 1.8% indicates that the international trading system is currently in a fragile phase. In such a situation, trade tariffs are no longer merely fiscal instruments, but have become political-economic tools that determine who benefits most from the global trade architecture. For developing countries such as Indonesia, this situation demands a re-evaluation of the old logic of free trade, which has long been assumed to be neutral, yet in practice often perpetuates unequal relations between the centre and the periphery. Consequently, the issue of decolonising global trade tariffs is crucial to address as part of efforts to build a trade system that is fairer, more sovereign, and better adapted to global turbulence. (UNCTAD, 2024)

Historically, the modern international trading system was shaped by a colonial legacy that positioned countries of the Global South as suppliers of raw materials and markets for the manufactured goods of developed nations. This pattern was subsequently institutionalised in various trade mechanisms, including tariff arrangements, market access, and rules of origin that often favoured the economies of major industrialised nations. In this context, colonialism is present not only in the form of territorial control, but also in the form of control over value structures, the flow of goods, and the direction

of economic specialisation. Tariff decolonisation means correcting this structural legacy through policies that provide greater scope for developing countries to build their own industrial capacity (Wood et al., 2019) .

In the discourse on global political economy, tariffs are often understood as trade barriers that need to be reduced in the interests of market efficiency. However, this view overlooks the fact that tariffs can also serve as a strategic instrument for protecting nascent industries, fiscal stabilisation, and counterbalancing structural inequalities. Developed nations, in their industrial history, actually made intensive use of tariff protection before achieving high global competitiveness. This implies that uniform demands for liberalisation do not always reflect historical justice, as developing nations are required to open their markets at a far earlier stage than was the case during the industrialisation of developed nations (Chang, 2003) .

The WTO, as the principal institution of the global trading system, does indeed prioritise the principles of non-discrimination and predictability, but its implementation does not always align with the development interests of developing countries. Many critics point out that WTO rules tend to restrict the policy space of countries in the Global South to employ selective protectionism, targeted subsidies, or aggressive industrial policies. On the other hand, developed countries retain greater capacity to utilise their technological, financial, and trade diplomatic capabilities to maintain their competitive edge. Consequently, projections of a slowdown in global trade concern not only transaction volumes but also which nations are best equipped to withstand increasingly fierce competition (Lester, 2011) .

For Indonesia, these challenges are even more complex because the country's export structure remains heavily reliant on primary commodities and natural resource-based products. When global trade slows, countries with low levels of diversification tend to be more vulnerable to falling prices, weakening demand and supply chain disruptions. This situation highlights that trade resilience depends not only on market access, but also on the domestic economy's capacity to generate added value. Consequently, Indonesia's strategy for addressing the situation in 2026 must go beyond short-term technical responses and move towards structural transformation. (BPS, 2024)

One of the key issues in global trade is the imbalance between countries that export high-value-added goods and those that remain trapped in the export of raw materials. In this context, tariffs not only regulate the flow of goods in and out of a country, but also help determine a country's position in the global value chain. Industrially strong countries tend to have a greater capacity to reap the benefits of trade, whilst countries that merely supply raw materials receive a smaller share of the value added. Consequently, the concept of tariff decolonisation is closely linked to the agenda of industrialisation, downstream processing, and the strengthening of the national production base (Amsden, 2001) .

Indonesia actually possesses the strategic assets to reposition itself within global trade, ranging from a large domestic market and a base of natural resources to a key geopolitical position in the Indo-Pacific region. However, these assets have not yet been fully translated into bargaining power within the international trading system. One of the

reasons for this is the still limited integration of trade, industry and investment policies within a single long-term development framework. Yet, tariff decolonisation requires countries not only to withstand external pressures, but also to build internal capacity so that they are able to determine their own trade direction. (ASEAN Secretariat, 2023)

Against the backdrop of a global trade slowdown, market diversification is becoming increasingly important for Indonesia. Over-reliance on traditional markets can heighten vulnerability when demand weakens or when protectionist policies rise in export destination countries. Therefore, strengthening trade ties with countries in the Global South, Africa, South Asia, and intra-ASEAN markets could form part of a broader tariff decolonisation strategy. This diversification is not merely about seeking new markets, but also about building more equitable trade networks that are less reliant on established economic centres. (UNCTAD, 2024) In addition to market diversification, industrial downstreaming serves as a key instrument for strengthening Indonesia's position in global trade. Downstreaming enables Indonesia to export higher-value-added products, thereby reducing reliance on raw material exports. This strategy also expands employment opportunities, strengthens the technological base, and increases state revenue through trade that is more oriented towards manufacturing and processing. From a decolonial perspective, downstream processing can be seen as an effort to break old patterns that position developing countries as providers of cheap inputs for global industry. (Indonesian Ministry of Industry, 2024)

However, downstream processing alone is not enough unless it is accompanied by reforms to national tariff policies that support strategic industries. Indonesia needs to design tariffs selectively so that priority sectors have room to grow before facing full competition from imported products. This approach is important because overly rapid liberalisation can cripple local industries that are not yet ready to compete in terms of technology or production scale. Thus, tariffs should not be viewed merely as barriers to trade, but rather as strategic tools to guide national economic development (Chang, 2003).

In the realm of international diplomacy, Indonesia also needs to be more active in promoting fairer trade reforms within both multilateral and regional forums. Active participation in WTO negotiations, ASEAN cooperation, and South-South partnerships can serve as a means of advocating for rules that allow greater scope for national development. This is important because a fair trading system will not emerge automatically from the market, but must be fought for through strong bargaining power and political coalitions among developing countries. Within this framework, tariff decolonisation becomes both an economic diplomacy agenda and a sovereignty agenda. (UNCTAD, 2024)

Furthermore, Indonesia's strategy must also take into account changes in trade structures resulting from digitalisation, the energy transition, and global geopolitical fragmentation. Economic competition now extends not only to physical goods, but also to the mastery of technology, data, logistics, and sustainability standards. Countries that fail to strengthen their innovation capacity will find it increasingly difficult to penetrate high-value markets, even if they possess abundant natural resources. Therefore, tariff

decolonisation must be understood as part of a comprehensive economic transformation, not merely a technical change in import and export duty policies. (World Bank, 2024)

Based on the above analysis, the projected slowdown in global trade by 2026 presents a crucial opportunity for Indonesia to rethink its trade strategy. By linking the concept of tariff decolonisation to Indonesia's specific needs, this article aims to demonstrate that trade policy can no longer be separated from the agendas of industrialisation, economic sovereignty and structural justice.

### **Research Methodology**

This study employs a literature review method using a qualitative-descriptive approach, which involves collecting, examining and synthesising various relevant written sources such as books, national journals, international journals and other related documents (Eliyah & Aslan, 2025). The data used is secondary in nature and was analysed through a process of source selection, theme classification, content interpretation, and critical conclusion drawing to produce a coherent and systematic conceptual argument (Walliman & Walliman, 2021).

### **Results and Discussion**

#### **Decolonisation of Global Trade Tariffs in the Context of Global Economic Inequality**

The decolonisation of global trade tariffs is an effort to dismantle international trade structures that continue to reproduce power relations inherited from the colonial era. In practice, the global tariff system has not operated in a neutral space, but has been shaped by a long history of economic domination by industrialised nations over developing countries. Countries in the Global North have greater capacity to set standards, negotiate, and determine the direction of trade liberalisation, whilst countries in the Global South are often positioned as recipients of pre-formulated rules. Consequently, tariff decolonisation is not merely a technical trade issue, but a political-economic agenda to create a more equitable global trading system (Wood et al., 2019).

Global economic inequality is clearly evident in the unequal distribution of roles within the global supply chain. Many developing countries remain confined to exporting raw materials, primary commodities, or low-value-added products, whilst developed nations dominate the processing, technology, distribution, and financing sectors. This structure means that trade profits flow more towards global economic centres than to the original producer countries. Within this framework, tariffs often serve as a tool that perpetuates inequality, as market access, trade preferences, and industrial protection are not always granted fairly to developing countries (Amsden, 2001).

Historically, many developed countries have built their industries through strong protectionist policies, including high tariffs, subsidies and consistent state intervention. However, once they have achieved a high level of competitiveness, they tend to push for liberalisation in other countries through international trade rules that are more restrictive for developing nations. This historical asymmetry demonstrates that calls for free markets do not always stem from universal principles, but often arise from an already established position of dominance. Therefore, tariff decolonisation should be understood

as a correction to the double standards in the history of global industrialisation. (Chang, 2002)

The WTO was indeed designed to maintain order in international trade through the principles of transparency, predictability and non-discrimination, but its implementation has often been criticised for not being sufficiently sensitive to the development needs of the Global South. Many trade rules require faster liberalisation, whilst scope for industrial policy and strategic protection is limited. In this situation, developing countries do not always have the leeway to protect sectors that are still fragile or newly emerging. Consequently, the global trading system tends to favour actors that are already technologically and financially strong (Lester, 2011) .

Global economic inequality is also evident in the distribution of trade negotiation capacity. Developed countries typically possess technical teams, legal research, diplomatic tools and economic clout that enable them to influence the content of trade agreements. Conversely, many developing countries face constraints in terms of data, human resources and bargaining power, leaving them more often in a defensive position. When tariffs form part of negotiations, this disparity in capacity means that the final outcome does not always reflect the interests of weaker nations. Thus, the issue of tariffs is not merely a matter of the level of import duties, but also a question of who is best placed to determine the rules of the game. (UNCTAD, 2024)

From an international political economy perspective, tariffs are instruments that can protect domestic industries, but can also be used as a tool of geopolitical pressure. When major countries impose retaliatory tariffs, global trade fragmentation increases and developing countries bear the brunt of the impact without having any significant influence over the initial decisions. WTO reports and warnings indicate that such fragmentation can reduce trade growth, increase uncertainty, and harm countries heavily reliant on specific exports. In this context, tariff decolonisation becomes relevant as it calls for a system that does not place the greatest risks on the most vulnerable parties. (WTO, 2024)

Developing countries often face a paradox within the global trading system: they are encouraged to open up their markets, yet at the same time lack a sufficiently strong industrial base to compete on equal terms. When tariffs are aggressively reduced without adequate protection, local industries can be squeezed out by cheaper and more established imported products. This situation deepens dependence on imports of finished goods, whilst domestic production capacity struggles to develop. Thus, tariff decolonisation can be understood as an effort to provide space for developing countries to pursue gradual industrialisation in line with their national needs (Lester, 2011) .

In many cases, tariff disparities also have an impact on employment structures and social welfare in developing countries. When the domestic manufacturing sector is not adequately protected, the creation of quality jobs is limited and the economy tends to remain dependent on labour-intensive commodities. This situation makes it difficult for developing countries to move up the global value chain. Therefore, tariff policy should not be viewed merely as a tool for generating state revenue, but as a development instrument

that can support economic transformation, labour absorption, and the equitable distribution of the benefits of trade (Amsden, 2001) .

This imbalance is also reflected in the ability of developed countries to set high technical, environmental and quality standards in global trade. Whilst such standards are important for promoting better practices, their implementation often creates additional barriers for developing countries that do not yet possess comparable infrastructure and technological capacity. In practice, high standards can become a new form of trade restriction that is more subtle but no less effective. Therefore, tariff decolonisation must be accompanied by a review of the entire architecture of trade barriers, including non-tariff regulations that may reinforce structural inequalities. (UNCTAD, 2024)

At the regional level, countries of the South are beginning to promote more equitable trade cooperation through regional integration and solidarity amongst developing nations. South-South cooperation has emerged as an alternative to a trade order that is overly reliant on established economic centres. Through market diversification, technology exchange and collective bargaining, developing countries can strengthen their bargaining position in global forums. Within this framework, tariff decolonisation does not mean rejecting international trade, but rather changing the direction and logic of trade relations to better serve shared development. (ASEAN Secretariat, 2023)

However, global tariff reform will not be effective unless accompanied by changes in the domestic production structure of developing countries. As long as the foundations of industry, research and innovation remain weak, developing countries will remain vulnerable to commodity price fluctuations and external pressures. This means that tariff decolonisation must be linked to policies on industrialisation, investment in technology and the strengthening of human resources. Tariffs will only become a transformative instrument if used within a broader development strategy and not as stagnant protectionism lacking productive direction (Rodrik, 2018) .

In the Indonesian context, global economic inequality has a direct impact on the structure of national trade. Indonesia continues to face the challenges of export diversification, the dominance of certain commodities, and the need to increase the value added of its domestic industries. If the global tariff system remains biased towards developed nations, Indonesia's scope for advancing in international trade will become increasingly limited. Therefore, the concept of tariff decolonisation is crucial to reopening the discussion on how Indonesia can protect its industrial interests whilst remaining active in global trade. (BPS, 2024) Beyond economic aspects, tariff inequality also has a sovereignty dimension. Countries lacking the policy space to set tariffs according to national needs tend to lose some control over the direction of their development. Economic sovereignty does not mean closing oneself off from international trade, but rather ensuring that economic openness does not weaken a country's ability to build industry, protect workers, and maintain national resilience. Thus, tariff decolonisation forms part of a broader struggle to restore the policy autonomy of developing nations (Blanco, 2020) .

Ultimately, the decolonisation of global trade tariffs must be understood as a structural agenda closely linked to international economic justice. As long as the tariff system continues to reflect historical inequalities, developing countries will remain in a subordinate position within global trade flows. The reforms required are not merely technical adjustments to import duty levels, but also a paradigm shift that recognises the right of developing countries to build their economies in a gradual, protective and sovereign manner. In a context of global trade uncertainty, this agenda becomes increasingly important as the foundation for creating a more inclusive and balanced trading system.

### **Indonesia's Strategy for Dealing with the Global Trade Slowdown (WTO Forecast: 1.8% in 2026)**

The slowdown in global trade projected by the WTO for 2026 places Indonesia in a situation that demands a more adaptive and targeted policy response. As global trade volumes weaken, countries heavily reliant on exports will feel the pressure more acutely through falling demand, price uncertainty and shifts in supply chain flows. In such circumstances, Indonesia's strategy must not merely be reactive, but must be designed as a medium-term agenda capable of maintaining export resilience whilst strengthening the foundations of the domestic economy. This is important because the global slowdown is not merely an external issue, but also a test of the quality of national trade governance. (WTO, 2024)

The first step that needs to be strengthened is the protection of the domestic market. Amid global trade uncertainty, the domestic market serves as a strategic buffer to maintain the stability of production and demand for domestic goods. Policies regarding the monitoring of goods in circulation, the evaluation of import flows, the protection of SMEs, and the application of trade remedy instruments such as anti-dumping and safeguard measures are essential to ensure that local industries are not squeezed out by competitively priced imported products. In a situation of global trade slowdown, strengthening the domestic market also serves as an instrument of national economic resilience. (Ministry of Trade of the Republic of Indonesia, 2026)

Domestic market protection policies must also be viewed as part of a broader tariff decolonisation strategy. If the domestic market is left too open without adequate competitive capacity, Indonesia will merely become a consumer market for foreign products, rather than a producer of added value. Therefore, selective protection of strategic sectors is not an anti-trade measure, but rather an effort to create room for national industries to grow so that they can compete more effectively. This approach is particularly relevant for the manufacturing, processed food and resource-based industries, which still require a period to strengthen their (Chang, 2003) .

The second strategy is to expand export markets through the diversification of trade destinations. Reliance on a few key markets increases vulnerability when the global economy weakens or when trading partners impose new barriers. Under the 2026 National Medium-Term Development Plan, the Indonesian government aims to accelerate various trade negotiations, such as the Indonesia-EU CEPA and the Indonesia-Tunisia PTA,

to open up broader market access. Market diversification should be directed not only towards developed nations, but also towards the Global South, Africa, the Middle East, and fellow ASEAN nations that possess potential for growth in demand. (CNBC Indonesia, 2026)

Diversifying export markets is also crucial to reducing the risk of excessive concentration on specific commodities. Many of Indonesia's export products remain highly dependent on global price fluctuations, meaning that even minor disruptions in international trade can have a significant impact on national revenue. By expanding its markets, Indonesia can spread the risk, increase opportunities for product uptake, and create space for MSMEs and medium-sized industries to scale up. In this context, exports are no longer viewed merely as sales volume, but as a strategy for building a more balanced national economic resilience. (BPS, 2024)

In addition to expanding its markets, Indonesia needs to strengthen programmes to enhance export competitiveness, particularly through improvements in product quality, certification, standardisation and the use of digital systems. The WTO estimates that global trade in goods will face pressure from economic fragmentation by 2026, whilst competition will increasingly shift towards high-value-added and technology-based products. Therefore, Indonesian exporters must be encouraged not only to sell goods, but also to build brand reputation, supply reliability, and compliance with international standards. For MSMEs, the digitalisation of marketing and enquiry management are key elements to remaining relevant in the global market. (WTO, 2024)

The next strategy is to enhance downstream processing and add value to domestic industries. The slowdown in global trade will be felt more acutely by countries that still rely on raw material exports, as commodity prices are highly vulnerable to shifts in global demand. Downstream processing enables Indonesia to export processed products with a higher selling price, whilst creating jobs, broadening the tax base and strengthening the capacity of the national industry. This policy aligns with Indonesia's long-term development direction, which aims to escape the commodity trap and move towards a manufacturing and innovation-based economy (Rodrik, 2018). However, downstream processing will only be effective if supported by adequate logistics, energy, and financing infrastructure. High logistics costs, port constraints and distribution barriers can reduce the competitiveness of domestic products in export markets. Therefore, strategies to address the global trade slowdown must combine industrial policy with trade infrastructure reforms. Without systemic support, downstreaming risks remaining merely a policy slogan and failing to genuinely alter Indonesia's position in the global value chain. (World Bank, 2024)

From the perspective of economic diplomacy, Indonesia needs to make more active use of bilateral, regional and multilateral forums to advocate for fair market access. In a context of trade fragmentation, trade agreements are a vital means of ensuring regulatory certainty and reducing both tariff and non-tariff barriers. The government also needs to strengthen its negotiating capabilities so that every trade agreement not only benefits major partners, but also delivers tangible benefits for strategic domestic sectors. This diplomacy must be conducted with a clear focus on national interests, not merely on

pursuing the number of agreements. (Ministry of Trade of the Republic of Indonesia, 2026) In addition to trade negotiations, Indonesia needs to expand South-South cooperation as a strategic alternative in the face of global slowdown. Developing countries generally face similar challenges, namely access to capital, pressure regarding standards, and dependence on established economic centres. Through South-South cooperation, Indonesia can build a more equitable market, strengthen economic solidarity, and foster the exchange of products and technologies that are more relevant to development needs. This approach also supports the agenda of tariff decolonisation by reducing dependence on trade structures dominated by developed nations (Blanco, 2020) .

In the face of global trade uncertainty, the SME sector must be positioned as a core component of the national export strategy, rather than a mere supplement. The government has emphasised the 'SMEs Can Export' programme, but its implementation needs to be strengthened through mentoring, access to market information, financing and logistical support. SMEs have significant potential to diversify export products, particularly in the processed food, handicrafts, and creative products sectors. If adequately supported, SMEs can act as a buffer that broadens Indonesia's export base whilst reducing reliance on large conglomerates. (Ministry of Trade of the Republic of Indonesia, 2025)

Another equally important strategy is to strengthen trade information systems and early detection of changes in global markets. In an increasingly volatile trade environment, the country needs the capacity to swiftly analyse trends in demand, the tariff policies of trading partners, and the risks of supply chain disruptions. A robust information system will help governments and businesses make more timely decisions, for example regarding adjustments to export targets, product diversification, or anticipating trade barriers. Consequently, trade policy will be based not only on reaction, but also on prediction and risk mitigation. (World Bank, 2024)

Ultimately, Indonesia's strategy for addressing the global trade slowdown must be based on three mutually reinforcing policy pillars: protection of the domestic market, expansion of export markets, and enhancement of structural competitiveness. These three pillars need to be implemented simultaneously so that Indonesia not only withstands global pressures but also seizes the opportunity to improve its bargaining position in international trade. In the context of the WTO's 2026 projections, Indonesia's success will be largely determined by the country's ability to integrate trade, industrial, diplomatic, and SME empowerment policies into a single, consistent development direction.

## **Conclusion**

The slowdown in global trade projected by the WTO for 2026 indicates that Indonesia can no longer rely on trade patterns that simply follow the logic of liberalisation without taking into account global structural inequalities. In this context , the decolonisation of global trade tariffs becomes crucial as it offers a new perspective for a more critical analysis of international trade relations, namely that tariffs are not merely

technical instruments, but also tools for restructuring economic power relations that have hitherto tended to favour developed nations.

For Indonesia, addressing the projected slowdown in global trade requires more than simply expanding markets; it must also be accompanied by the strengthening of domestic industry, downstream processing, export diversification, protection of the domestic market, and more aggressive economic diplomacy. All these measures must be understood as a unified strategy to enhance the resilience of the national economy whilst strengthening Indonesia's bargaining position within the global trading system. If these policies are implemented consistently, Indonesia will not only be able to withstand external pressures but will also have the opportunity to become a more active player in driving reforms towards a fairer international trading system.

Ultimately, the decolonisation of global trade tariffs is not merely a normative concept, but a strategic necessity for developing countries such as Indonesia to break free from the structural dependence inherited from the history of world trade. The WTO's projections for 2026 should be interpreted as both a warning and an opportunity to strengthen national economic self-reliance through selective, adaptive, and development-oriented trade policies. With such an approach, Indonesia can respond to the global trade slowdown not merely as a threat, but as an opportunity to build a more robust, inclusive, and sovereign economic foundation.

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