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THE ROLE OF CUSTOMS DIPLOMACY IN THE CONTEXT OF UZBEKISTAN'S ACCESSION TO THE WORLD TRADE ORGANIZATION

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Abstract: The article analyzes the role of customs diplomacy in the process of Uzbekistan's accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO). It examines the importance of customs diplomacy in ensuring compliance with WTO rules, simplifying trade procedures, enhancing export potential, and fostering international cooperation. The tasks, challenges, and opportunities facing customs services in the context of Uzbekistan's integration into the WTO are highlighted with specific examples and based on international experience. Additionally, proposals are offered for the development of customs diplomacy.

Keywords: World Trade Organization (WTO), customs diplomacy, Uzbekistan, trade integration, tariffs, trade facilitation, export, international cooperation, customs services, economic reforms.

The process of Uzbekistan's accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO) is considered one of the most important reforms in the country's economy. This process creates significant opportunities for Uzbekistan to integrate into the global economic system, expand its foreign trade relations, and increase its competitiveness in international markets. WTO membership requires not only the modernization of economic policy but also fundamental changes in customs services and diplomacy. Customs diplomacy plays a central role in this process, as it serves as an important tool for the country's adaptation to international trade rules, the simplification of border trade procedures, and the strengthening of economic cooperation between states. This article provides a detailed examination of the role, tasks, importance, challenges, and opportunities of customs diplomacy in the context of Uzbekistan's WTO membership.

The Essence of Customs Diplomacy and Its Connection with the WTO

Customs diplomacy refers to the activities of customs authorities in coordinating trade relations between states, ensuring compliance with international regulations, and managing border processes. This term signifies that customs services play a crucial role not only at the local level but also on a global scale. Membership in the WTO requires Uzbekistan to assume a number of obligations, including the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), such as matters like adherence to the Agreement on Technical Barriers to Trade and the Agreement on Customs Valuation. These documents require the country to align its customs policy with international standards and reduce trade barriers.[1]

Uzbekistan submitted a formal application for WTO membership in 1994, but active negotiations only began in recent years. In 2023, President Shavkat Mirziyoyev announced the goal of completing the WTO membership process within three years. To achieve this goal, customs services must play a key role in aligning with global rules, simplifying import-export processes, and expanding international cooperation. Customs diplomacy, in turn, plays a key

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role in protecting Uzbekistan's interests and reaching agreements with other countries during these processes.

The essence of customs diplomacy is that it not only manages technical processes but also encompasses the diplomatic aspect of economic policy. For example, while the reduction of tariffs under WTO rules can affect local producers, customs diplomacy allows for the negotiation of transition period benefits to mitigate these changes. Therefore, customs diplomacy is of strategic importance in Uzbekistan's WTO accession process.

World Trade Organization (WTO). (2023). Official website: WTO rules and agreements.https://www.wto.org

[2] Official website of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan. (2023). Objectives for WTO membership. https://president.uz.

Key Tasks of Customs Diplomacy in the WTO Context

Uzbekistan's accession to the WTO requires customs diplomacy to perform a number of complex tasks. First, customs authorities must ensure compliance with the WTO's trade rules. Currently, in Uzbekistan, customs duties for imported products, particularly agricultural products, are high—reaching up to 150 percent (30% customs duty, 100% excise tax, 20% VAT and a 0.2% customs clearance fee). WTO membership requires a significant reduction in these rates, but negotiations must be conducted through customs diplomacy to ensure this process does not harm local producers.

Secondly, customs diplomacy plays a crucial role in simplifying cross-border trade processes. The WTO's Trade Facilitation Agreement (TFA) requires that customs procedures be transparent, expeditious, and efficient. In Uzbekistan, current customs clearance procedures take an average of 1.5 to 3 days, which leads to additional costs for exporters and importers. Customs diplomacy serves to simplify this process by digitizing it, implementing international experience, and attracting technical assistance from donor organizations.

Third, customs diplomacy is seen as a key instrument for developing international cooperation. By joining the WTO, Uzbekistan will have the opportunity to strengthen trade relations with 164 countries. This requires customs authorities to sign bilateral and multilateral agreements with the customs services of other countries, expand transit routes, and develop border cooperation. For example, simplifying transit processes at the border with Kazakhstan could make it easier for Uzbek exporters to access the Russian and European markets.

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[3] State Customs Committee. (2022). Customs Tariffs and Statistics in Uzbekistan. https://customs.uz.

[4] WTO. (2017). Trade Facilitation Agreement (TFA). https://www.wto.org/tfa.

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[5] World Bank. (2020). Doing Business 2020: Uzbekistan. https://www.worldbank.org.

Furthermore, customs diplomacy is also important in enhancing Uzbekistan's potential as a regional trade hub. By adhering to WTO rules, Uzbekistan, which borders Central Asian states, can create favorable conditions for transit cargo. In this process, customs diplomacy not only addresses technical issues but also actively participates in political and economic negotiations.

The Economic Significance of Customs Diplomacy for Uzbekistan

WTO membership brings significant opportunities to Uzbekistan's economy, but it can also present a number of challenges. Customs diplomacy plays a crucial role in leveraging these opportunities and mitigating challenges. For example, under WTO requirements, import tariff rates must be lowered to the regional average. Currently, in Uzbekistan, customs duties on agricultural products are high, serving to protect local producers. Upon joining the WTO, these rates are expected to decrease, which could intensify competition in the domestic market. Through customs diplomacy, Uzbekistan must seek to preserve transition period preferences for sensitive sectors, such as agriculture and textiles, through negotiations.

Furthermore, customs diplomacy is crucial for enhancing export potential. The simplification of customs procedures and the reduction of transit costs are crucial for Uzbekistan's main export products—cotton, textiles, fruits and vegetables, and gold—to be competitive in WTO markets. In 2021, as a result of Uzbekistan's accession to the GSP+ system, exports of finished products to the European Union increased by 1.5 times. JST membership will further expand these opportunities, and signing trade agreements with other member states through customs diplomacy will contribute to increasing export volumes.

However, there are also negative aspects to WTO membership. According to World Bank data, a sharp reduction in tariffs can put pressure on local producers and lead to an influx of imported goods.

[6] Ministry of Economy and Finance of Uzbekistan. (2022). GSP+ system and export results. https://mineconomy.uz

Customs diplomacy is an important tool in this process, helping to find a balance between protecting Uzbekistan's domestic market and expanding its export opportunities.

International Experience of Customs Diplomacy and Prospects for Its Application in Uzbekistan

The experience of WTO member states serves as an important guide for Uzbekistan in developing customs diplomacy. After China joined the WTO in 2001, it modernized its customs services and, by gradually lowering tariffs, increased its foreign trade volume ninefold within 20 years. China's customs diplomacy has been successful in defending its cheap labor force and export-oriented strategy. Uzbekistan can also use a similar strategy to strengthen its agricultural and light industry potential in the global market.

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Kazakhstan's experience is also noteworthy. Having joined the WTO in 2015, Kazakhstan became a regional trade hub by digitizing its customs services and developing transit routes. For Uzbekistan, this experience could be useful in expanding cooperation with neighboring countries in the Central Asian region. Through customs diplomacy, Uzbekistan can enhance its transit potential by simplifying border trade processes with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan.[9]

Furthermore, Vietnam's experience with WTO membership (2007) also provides useful lessons for Uzbekistan. Vietnam used customs diplomacy to develop an export-oriented policy and increased its export volume 6-fold within 15 years. In this process, customs services were digitized and large amounts of assistance were attracted from international donors. Uzbekistan can also adopt a similar approach.

[7] World Bank. (2023). Uzbekistan Economic Report. https://www.worldbank.org/uzbekistan

[8] General Administration of Customs of the People's Republic of China. (2021). Post-WTO Accession Statistics. https://customs.gov.cn

[9] Customs Service of Kazakhstan. (2021). Transit statistics. https://customs.gov.kz

Challenges and Solutions in Developing Customs Diplomacy

In the process of Uzbekistan's accession to the WTO, customs diplomacy is facing a number of challenges. First, the qualifications and international experience of customs personnel are limited. According to the State Customs Committee, the majority of staff do not fully understand WTO rules. To address this problem, it is advisable to involve the training programs of the World Customs Organization and the World Trade Organization and to organize specialized training.

Secondly, the customs infrastructure needs modernization. There is a shortage of border scanners, digital systems, and automated checkpoints. According to the World Bank, trade costs remain high in Uzbekistan due to its outdated customs infrastructure. The solution is to attract investments from international financial institutions and implement digitization projects.

Third, the effectiveness of customs diplomacy depends on experience in international negotiations. To protect its interests when signing bilateral agreements with WTO member states, Uzbekistan needs to prepare its customs officials for diplomatic negotiations. For this, close cooperation must be established between the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the State Customs Committee.

Conclusion

In the context of Uzbekistan's WTO membership, customs diplomacy serves as a key factor in the country's integration into the global trading system. It plays a key role in ensuring compliance with WTO rules, simplifying trade procedures, increasing export potential, and strengthening international cooperation. The effective operation of customs diplomacy opens up

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significant opportunities for Uzbekistan's economy, but this process requires a strategy based on qualified personnel, modern infrastructure, and international experience. The government must pay special attention to modernizing customs services and developing diplomatic relations. Only in this way can Uzbekistan maximize the benefits of its WTO membership and secure a worthy position in the global economic arena.

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5. World Bank. (2020). Doing Business 2020: Uzbekistan. https://www.worldbank.org

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11. General Administration of Customs of the People's Republic of China. (2021). Post-accession WTO statistics. https://customs.gov.cn

12. Ministry of Economy of Kazakhstan. (2022). WTO membership experience. https://economy.gov.kz

13. World Bank. (2023). Analysis of Uzbekistan's Customs Infrastructure. https://www.worldbank.org