

Welcome to a new edition of the bilaterals.org podcast where we discuss the most recent developments around free trade agreements.

The US government is exploring ways of furthering trade and investment ties with African countries.

Last month, at a summit between the US President and 49 African governments, arose the possibility that the African Growth and Opportunity Act, which comes to an end in 2025, could be replaced by an agreement with the African Continental Free Trade Area. It would give US companies access to 1.3 billion people and a market valued at \$3.4-trillion.

The US-Africa Business Center of the US Chamber of Commerce, and the African Continental Free Trade Area Secretariat signed a Memorandum of Understanding to launch a working group to help advance trade and investment between the US and Africa.

In the next three years, the US is also considering a \$55 billion investment in the continent.

Trade talks between Kenya and the US resumed last month. Last year, Kenya lifted a decades-old ban on genetically modified crops, after being pressured by the US to allow access to GM food produced by American companies. The US-Kenya trade talks started under the Trump administration and have been seen as a Trojan horse for US corporations in Africa.

The first formal negotiating round of the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework was held last December in Australia.

The initiative was criticized by women's rights organisations, labour unions and other civil society groups. They oppose the use of Big Tech "upskilling" initiatives for women to encourage countries to sign on to the Framework. They say the digital trade rules Big Tech wrote to deepen their power, will undermine, not advance, women's human rights.

Burnad Fatima of Society for Rural Education and Development in India emphasized that the IPEF is a mere 'pinkwashing' tactic that will not genuinely respond to the needs of women, especially those in the marginalised sectors.

Women groups added that the IPEF was not just about economic trade, but a link in the chain of US hegemonic dominance in Asia-Pacific. They said women must resist the IPEF and stand their ground in the face of intensifying US-China rivalry and its encroachment on their lives as sovereign peoples.

Māori groups also said that the IPEF breached the obligations of the New Zealand Government to Māori under the Treaty of Waitangi.

Negotiations are expected to be fast tracked throughout 2023.

As the third round of negotiations for a Free Trade Agreement between the European Union and India concluded last month, the Forum for Trade Justice, which is a national network of more than 100 organizations that includes farmers' groups, trade unions, patient groups, traders, women's rights organizations, academics and NGOs, has expressed concern that the FTA could have serious repercussions for India's development and undermine livelihoods across multiple sectors.

Farmers explained that the proposed FTA targeted reduction or complete elimination of import duties in agricultural, dairy, meat, poultry and fisheries products, which would create serious threats for millions of Indian farmers, fishers and milk producers, many of whom are small-scale producers and many are women.

They added that they are not interested in selling in EU markets and cannot even meet the EU standards. But heavily subsidised products from the EU will take away their space in their national market.

The EU is also attempting to force India to join the UPOV 1991 convention, which would compromise Indian farmers' traditional free use and exchange of seeds.

Doctors Without Borders said that the EU's proposed text on intellectual property extends the patent term by five years, which would extend monopolies on new medicines and keep prices high for an extended period.

In terms of the digital economy, the EU wants free cross-border data flows and the full opening of government data which would challenge India's sovereign rights over its data and the policy space to use such data for the benefits of Indian communities, workers, small enterprises, start-ups, and so on. Making such concessions to the EU would also have implications for India's security

And now looking ahead to 2023 and what else is to be expected.

The European Union intends to multiply free trade agreements with countries having strategic mineral and metal resources. In December the EU signed a trade deal with Chile that possesses some of the largest lithium reserves in the world, which was criticized by 500 organizations and members of parliaments. Last year the bloc also signed deals on raw materials with Kazakhstan and Namibia. And in 2023, the EU is planning to sign agreements with Mexico and Australia, both providers of raw materials.

The trade deal between the EU and Mercosur will come back under the spotlight as well, now that new Brazilian President Lula has been sworn in. In the next few weeks, the European Commission is expected to issue a statement on a possible additional instrument to the agreement while some officials from the Mercosur bloc said they wanted to reopen the negotiations.

Over 200 groups from Latin America and Europe signed a statement condemning the European Commission's attempt to change the voting process for upcoming trade agreements. The Commission wants to make it easier and faster for deals to be implemented without the consent of national parliaments.

In Malaysia, there has been a strong opposition against the ratification of the Transpacific Partnership which will likely continue in 2023.

The Indian government is planning to continue trade negotiations with the EU, the United Kingdom, the European Free Trade Association, Canada, among others.

The governments of South Korea, Bangladesh and the United Arab Emirates also said they would seek to sign several free trade deals in the near future.

Finally in North America, the US and Canada have argued that measures that favor Mexican energy companies are in breach of the USMCA. The US has also claimed Mexico's ban on genetically modified corn does not respect commitments made under trade deals. Both disputes are expected to move forward in 2023.