

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

The UK has reached a deal to join the Trans-Pacific Partnership, known as the CPTPP.

Joining the 11-nation agreement is a way of building its global trade links after leaving the European Union, but also part of the British foreign policy shift towards the Indo-Pacific.

Australia and Japan see the UK as a natural ally in pushing back against China's geopolitical ambitions.

Civil society group Global Justice Now said it was a 'reckless gamble by a government willing to sacrifice British farmers, workers and the planet in its desperation for a symbolic success'.

It added that the deal will let multinational corporations sue the UK government for introducing policies that hurt their profits, which could include almost anything that helps the country meet its net-zero climate targets.

Health experts also said that the CPTPP poses a major threat to public health and policy-making in the UK, as it commits the country to certain regulatory and legal obligations.

For example, they said it is likely to make it harder to implement policies to reduce the consumption of tobacco, alcohol and unhealthy food and drink.

The second round of negotiations of the Indo-Pacific Economic Framework, known as IPEF, took place in Bali from the 13th to the 19th of March. The Indonesian Civil Society Coalition for Economic Justice held a protest in front of the US Embassy in Jakarta to express its rejection of the deal.

Following the launch of the IPEF, the US government released a report containing a list of priorities for the reduction of non-tariff barriers, which the IPEF seeks to promote through the harmonisation of a number of policies and regulations that the US consider as technical barriers to trade.

Social movements stated that these efforts to harmonise policies through the IPEF could cause problems and have far-reaching effects. In the agricultural sector, for example, efforts to harmonise technical barriers to trade could force Indonesia to relax domestic regulations on genetically modified seed and food imports.

For the movements, the IPEF is a US enterprise for hegemonic domination and the continuation of the Cold War. Ultimately, it will harm the sovereignty of nations and the human rights of Asian women and people in developing countries.

The US Trade Representative defended the Biden administration's decision not to pursue traditional free trade deals, which normally seek market access through tariff reductions. She argued that this approach works best to expand US food exports.

It is the basis for US trade engagements such as the IPEF, the Americas Partnership for Economic Prosperity and the proposed trade deal with Kenya.

In other news, a delegation from the European Union's trade committee visited South Africa to discuss upgrading the Economic Partnership Agreement with the Southern African bloc.

The current agreement doesn't include provisions on services, investment, intellectual property and public procurement, which the EU wants to add.

Kenya and the European Commission have also agreed to review their Economic Partnership Agreement, which could be signed in June 2023.

And as mentioned in a previous podcast, the EU is also negotiating an upgrade of the EPA with the Eastern and Southern African regional bloc.

Last month, leaked documents revealed that the proposed annex to the EU-Mercosur agreement, supposedly designed to protect the environment, climate and human rights, does nothing of the sort.

Friends of the Earth Europe said that instead of offering real change, the proposed joint instrument only offers cosmetic, aspirational and unenforceable adjustments.

They added that there are no new measures to address deforestation, climate change, human rights abuses or animal welfare. The EU-Mercosur agreement is still actively pushing South America towards ecological collapse, propping up a destructive neo-colonial economic system and fuelling social inequalities.

Critics from Palestinian solidarity organisations to countries of the Global South have slammed Canada for its casual responses to the recent killings of over 80 Palestinians.

They said there should be more focus on the Canada-Israel Free Trade Agreement, which is a political and economic tool for normalising Israeli injustice.

They accused the trade deal of directly and indirectly facilitating Israeli apartheid. The agreement is silent on whether products made in illegal Israeli settlements can benefit from preferential access to the Canadian market. They say it actually appears to encourage it.

They concluded that Canada must cancel its free trade agreement with Israel.

Finally, last Monday was the International Day of Peasant Struggles. An updated text summarising food and agriculture issues in free trade agreements has recently been published on bilaterals.org. Be sure to read it.

And that's it for today. I'm Nicolas Roux, bilaterals.org. If you'd like to read more information about this podcast's content, you can click on the links provided in the description box. More trade news coming up soon in our next podcast. In the meantime, you can visit bilaterals.org.