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## Navigating the Tariff Storm: The Impact of Trade Tariff Wars on Transfer Pricing in India and Global Strategic Responses for MNEs

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### Abstract

*This white paper examines the impact of trade tariff wars on transfer pricing strategies for multinational enterprises (MNEs). With the recent escalation of tariffs, particularly those imposed by the United States, MNEs face significant challenges in maintaining arm's length pricing while navigating increased costs and regulatory scrutiny. The paper explores how tariffs affect transfer pricing methods, the global perspectives from different countries, and strategic responses that MNEs can adopt to mitigate these impacts. Through analysis and case studies, this white paper provides insights into the complexities of transfer pricing in a tariff-laden global trade environment and offers recommendations for MNEs to ensure compliance and optimize their tax positions.*

### Preface

"This white paper draws from the author's ongoing PhD research, providing key insights tailored for industry stakeholders. The full thesis, upon completion, will offer a more detailed academic analysis."

**Keywords:** Transfer pricing, trade tariffs, multinational enterprises, arm's length principle, supply chain restructuring, tax compliance, global trade, MNE strategies, tariff impact, international taxation.

## 1. Introduction

### Overview of Trade Tariff Wars and Their Global Impact

Trade tariff wars have become a defining feature of the global economic landscape, with major economies such as the United States, China, India, and the European Union imposing tariffs on each other's goods to protect domestic industries, address trade imbalances, or pressure trading partners into renegotiating trade agreements. These tariff wars have far-reaching consequences, disrupting global supply chains, increasing costs for businesses, and creating uncertainty in international trade. As of now, the United States has imposed significant tariffs on various countries, including India, with a total tariff of 50% on Indian goods, primarily due to India's continued purchases of Russian oil. These measures have intensified the challenges faced by multinational enterprises (MNEs) operating across borders, particularly in managing their transfer pricing strategies.

### Importance of Transfer Pricing in International Taxation

Transfer pricing refers to the pricing of transactions between related entities within an MNE, such as subsidiaries, affiliates, or parent companies. It plays a critical role in international taxation by ensuring that profits are allocated fairly between countries and that tax revenues are not eroded through artificial profit shifting. Transfer pricing must adhere to the "arm's length principle," which requires that transactions between related parties be priced as if they were between unrelated parties in an open market. However, trade tariff wars introduce new complexities, as tariffs can distort market prices and cost structures, making it challenging for MNEs to determine appropriate arm's length prices while complying with local tax laws.

This white paper explores how trade tariff wars, particularly those involving India, impact transfer pricing practices in India and compares these effects with those in other major jurisdictions. It also discusses the strategic responses that MNEs can adopt to navigate this challenging environment.

## 2. Transfer Pricing in India

### Legal Framework and Key Regulations

India's transfer pricing regime is governed by Chapter X of the Income Tax Act, 1961, which mandates that all international transactions between related parties must be conducted at arm's length prices. The key principles include:

- **Arm's Length Principle:** Transactions must be priced as if they were between unrelated parties.
- **Methods for Determining Arm's Length Price:** India recognizes five methods:
  - Comparable Uncontrolled Price (CUP)
  - Resale Price Method
  - Cost Plus Method
  - Profit Split Method
  - Transactional Net Margin Method (TNMM), which is the most commonly used.
- **Documentation Requirements:** MNEs must maintain detailed documentation, including master files, local files, and country-by-country reports for large enterprises (global revenue  $\geq$  €750 million).
- **Advance Pricing Agreements (APAs):** MNEs can enter into APAs with tax authorities to pre-agree on transfer pricing methods and outcomes, providing certainty.

## Documentation Requirements and Compliance Challenges

India's transfer pricing documentation requirements are stringent, requiring MNEs to maintain extensive records to justify their pricing decisions. This includes functional, asset, and risk analyses, as well as benchmarking studies to identify comparable transactions. The compliance burden is particularly high for large MNEs, as they must prepare three-tier documentation (master file, local file, and country-by-country report). Failure to comply can result in penalties, audits, and disputes with tax authorities.

## Recent Developments and Alignment with BEPS

India has aligned its transfer pricing regime with the OECD's Base Erosion and Profit Shifting (BEPS) project, which has introduced more rigorous rules and increased compliance requirements. For example, the introduction of country-by-country reporting and the expansion of documentation requirements have added to the complexity of compliance for MNEs operating in India.

## 3. Impact of Trade Tariffs on Transfer Pricing in India

### Specific Tariff Measures Affecting India

India has been significantly impacted by trade tariffs, particularly from the United States. Key developments include:

- **US Imposes 50% Tariff:** As of now, the US announced a 50% tariff on Indian goods, due to India's continued purchases of Russian oil. This tariff applies to a wide range of Indian exports, excluding pharmaceuticals, semiconductors, and certain energy products. These tariffs target sectors like textiles, gems, jewellery, and auto parts, potentially impacting 1% of India's GDP directly and threatening 2 million jobs. BRICS membership, seen as challenging US influence.
- **India's Response:** India is assessing the tariff impact and pursuing a bilateral trade agreement with the US, aiming to double trade to \$500 billion by 2030. India is considering slashing tariffs on \$23 billion of US imports (gems, jewellery, pharmaceuticals, auto parts) to mitigate effects. India defends its energy choices as sovereign and is strengthening ties with Russia and China to maintain strategic autonomy. It's also diversifying export markets (Africa, Latin America, Southeast Asia) and supporting MSMEs through interest subsidies and loan guarantees. India has avoided immediate retaliation but reserves the right to impose duties, as seen in its May 2025 WTO notification of \$1.91 billion in retaliatory tariffs on \$7.6 billion of US goods.
- **Other Tariffs:** India has not faced specific retaliatory tariffs from China in 2025, but trade tensions persist globally. India's improving ties with China, highlighted by Modi's SCO Summit visit (August 31–September 1, 2025), aim to counterbalance US pressure. India's high tariffs (17% average, 39% on agriculture) remain a sticking point in US talks, with agriculture and dairy as key hurdles.

These tariffs strain India-US ties, push India toward market diversification, and highlight its balancing act in global trade amid geopolitical tensions. Modi's SCO visit underscores efforts to bolster ties with China and Russia as a counterweight.

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## **How Tariffs Influence Cost Structures and Pricing Strategies**

Tariffs directly increase the cost of imports and exports, which can affect the pricing of intercompany transactions. For example:

- If an Indian subsidiary imports raw materials from a related party abroad, the US tariff increases the cost of those materials, which may need to be reflected in the transfer price.
- Conversely, if an Indian subsidiary exports finished goods to a US affiliate, the 50% tariff increases the cost of those goods in the US market, potentially requiring adjustments to the transfer price.

However, determining the arm's length price becomes more complex because tariffs are regulatory impositions rather than market-driven costs. MNEs must carefully analyze how tariffs impact their cost structures and ensure that their transfer pricing policies comply with Indian tax laws while also considering global tax implications.

### **Challenges in Maintaining Arm's Length Pricing**

The unpredictability of tariffs, as they can change based on trade negotiations, adds complexity to transfer pricing planning. MNEs must continuously monitor trade developments and adjust their pricing strategies accordingly. Additionally, the need for detailed documentation to justify tariff-related adjustments increases compliance costs and audit risks.

## **4. Comparison with Other Jurisdictions**

### **United States: Transfer Pricing and Tariff Impacts**

The US has imposed tariffs on a wide range of goods, including those from India, China, and the EU. US transfer pricing rules allow for flexibility in choosing the most appropriate method (e.g., CUP, TNMM), but MNEs must justify their pricing in light of tariff impacts. For example, a 50% tariff on imports increases costs for US importers, requiring adjustments to ensure arm's length results. However, retroactive adjustments can increase tax risks, such as facing tariffs on higher import prices while claiming deductions on lower adjusted transfer prices.

### **China: Navigating Tariffs and Transfer Pricing**

China has been heavily affected by US tariffs, with rates as high as 125% on certain goods. Chinese transfer pricing rules are strict, but there may be more flexibility in adjusting prices to account for tariff-related costs. However, documentation and compliance remain critical, with tax authorities scrutinizing profit allocation in supply chains.

### **European Union: Regional Approaches and Challenges**

The EU has a fragmented approach to transfer pricing, with each member state having its own rules. However, the overall impact of tariffs on transfer pricing may be less pronounced due to the EU's internal market. The EU is also engaging with China to address trade diversion caused by US tariffs, indicating a collaborative approach to mitigating tariff impacts.

### **Other Emerging Markets: Similarities and Differences with India**

Countries like Vietnam and Mexico have seen increased investment as MNEs seek to diversify their supply chains away from tariff-affected regions. Their transfer pricing regimes are

generally less stringent than India's, with lower compliance burdens. For example, Vietnam's transfer pricing rules are evolving, with Decree 132/2020 introducing stricter documentation requirements, but they are still less rigorous than India's established transfer pricing regime.

## 5. Why MNEs Might Shift Operations from India

India's transfer pricing regime is known for its high compliance costs, detailed documentation requirements, and audit risks. These factors, combined with the additional burdens imposed by recent tariffs, may make India less attractive for MNEs. Key reasons include:

- **High Compliance Costs and Audit Risks:** The need for extensive documentation and the potential for disputes with tax authorities can be burdensome.
- **Limited Tax Optimization Opportunities:** India's strict enforcement of the arm's length principle limits MNEs' ability to shift profits to low-tax jurisdictions.
- **Attractive Alternatives:** Jurisdictions like Singapore (17% corporate tax rate, streamlined processes) and Ireland (12.5% corporate tax rate, favourable IP rules) offer lower costs and simpler compliance.

## 6. Global Strategic Responses for MNEs

MNEs can adopt several strategies to mitigate the impact of trade tariffs on their transfer pricing:

1. **Supply Chain Restructuring:** Relocating production or sourcing to countries less affected by tariffs, such as Vietnam or Mexico.
2. **Reviewing Transfer Pricing Policies:** Regularly updating policies to account for tariff-induced cost changes and ensuring compliance with local laws.
3. **Enhancing Documentation:** Maintaining robust documentation to justify tariff-related adjustments and withstand tax audits.
4. **Engaging with Tax Authorities:** Utilizing APAs and mutual agreement procedures (MAPs) to pre-agree on transfer pricing treatments.
5. **Leveraging Technology:** Using data analytics and AI to monitor tariff changes and manage transfer pricing more efficiently.

## 7. Conclusion and Recommendations

### Summary of Key Findings

Trade tariff wars, particularly the US's 50% tariff on Indian goods, have significantly impacted transfer pricing in India. MNEs face challenges in maintaining arm's length pricing while dealing with increased costs and regulatory uncertainty. India's strict transfer pricing regime, with its high compliance burden, contrasts with other jurisdictions like Singapore and Ireland, which offer more favourable environments.

### Policy Suggestions for India

To retain MNE investments, India should:

- Streamline transfer pricing documentation requirements to reduce compliance costs.
- Provide more certainty through mechanisms like APAs.
- Negotiate favourable trade terms with the US to mitigate tariff impacts.

## Recommendations for MNEs

MNEs should:

- Stay informed about trade developments and adapt their strategies.
- Consider supply chain restructuring and technology solutions to manage tariff impacts.
- Enhance documentation and engage with tax authorities to minimize disputes.

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## Appendix

**Table 1: Global Corporate Tax and Transfer Pricing Comparison**

Jurisdiction	Corporate Tax Rate	Transfer Pricing Features	Tariff Impact on TP
<b>India</b>	22%–25%	Strict, BEPS-aligned, high documentation, dispute risks	High, with rigorous audits and adjustments
<b>US</b>	21%	Flexible methods, IRS scrutiny, retroactive risk	Significant, cost allocation challenges
<b>China</b>	25%	Strict, value chain focus, potential flexibility	High, supply chain shifts and scrutiny
<b>EU</b>	Varies (e.g., 12.5% in Ireland)	Fragmented, OECD-aligned, less tariff impact	Moderate, internal market buffers effects
<b>Vietnam</b>	20%	Evolving, less stringent than India	Low, attracting supply chain diversification
<b>Mexico</b>	30%	OECD-aligned, simpler compliance	Moderate, benefiting from USMCA