

# U.S.-Japan Agreements on Beef Imports: A Case of Successful Bilateral Negotiations

John Dyck

## Abstract

Over more than 20 years, successive rounds of bilateral negotiations between the United States and Japan opened the Japanese market to beef imports. These negotiations were grounded in the GATT rules and linked in important ways to simultaneous multilateral trade negotiations. U.S. beef trade with Japan flourished in the aftermath of the U.S.-Japan beef agreements. The United States maintained its large share of a growing market as managed trade under the quota system was replaced by free trade. The agreements opened a beef market now worth over \$1 billion in exports each year to the U.S. industry, and should be viewed as a major success for bilateral negotiations within the multilateral GATT framework.

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## Introduction

In 1988, the United States and Japan signed an agreement to phase out Japan's quota system for beef imports. Since 1991, Japan's beef trade has been limited only by Japan's sanitary barriers and ad valorem tariffs. The 1988 agreement culminated a series of negotiations about Japan's beef imports and defused what had been a major source of trade friction. The size and value of Japan's beef imports as well as the length and intensity of the negotiations make this a leading example of bilateral problem-solving in agricultural trade. This article examines the nature, benefits, and costs of the negotiations and examines the relationship of this bilateral case to multilateral negotiations. While the costs of attaining the beef agreements were high, the benefits in terms of improved agricultural trade performance for the United States seem to be considerable. Rather than being a

strategy in competition with multinational negotiations, the U.S.-Japan beef negotiations should be viewed as a successful outgrowth of and complement to the multilateral trade framework of the GATT.

## Japan's Beef Market

Japan's cattle had been primarily used as draft animals until the 1950's and 1960's when field cultivation shifted to motor power. But Japan's field cultivation farm community retained the Japanese draft breed—Wagyu—as a beef animal, and many of Japan's small farmers kept 1 or 2 cattle to market for slaughter. Grain feeding, introduced about 1960, allowed cattle fattening to proceed beyond the bounds of Japan's own feed sources, which are quite limited because of the lack of pasture and feedgrain crops. Wagyu meat marbles well, with fat tissue interspersed in the muscle so that the meat is very tender. Grain feeding to

achieve a high degree of marbling quickly became so intensive that Wagyu meat was raised with a much longer fattening period than in other parts of the world. At the same time, milk consumption was rising fast in Japan, leading to the development of a large dairy herd based on Holstein animals. Beef from Wagyu animals was supplemented by beef from the steers and unbred heifers of the dairy herd, which were also intensively fattened.

Japanese consumption of beef grew quickly from a very small base, beginning in the 1960's. The Government retained control over beef imports, and beef prices in Japan became quite high by international standards because supply was limited to the high-cost domestic production. Beef was regarded as a luxury commodity.

### Japan's Trade Rules

After acceding to the GATT in 1955, Japan blocked the entry of many products under the "balance of payments" clause (Article XI) of the GATT. When Japan disinvoked this justification in 1963, it kept its quota on beef imports as one of the "residual import restrictions" no longer clearly permissible under the GATT. The Government originally administered import quotas primarily to orchestrate beef prices in the Japanese market. The Livestock Industry Promotion Corporation (LIPC), a government-owned corporation established in 1961, promoted orderly growth in Japan's livestock product markets, monitoring price bands for meats and intervening in the market when prices became too high or too low. The LIPC had important trade functions, administering Japan's variable levy on pork imports and acting as the principal importing agent for beef.

Japan has long been completely free of foot-and-mouth disease, a viral disease that affects cattle and swine. To avoid possible infection from meat imports, Japan imposes a ban on imports of fresh, chilled, and frozen beef from countries where the disease may be present. In the 1960's, 1970's, and 1980's, this limited its imports to the small number of areas that were foot-and-

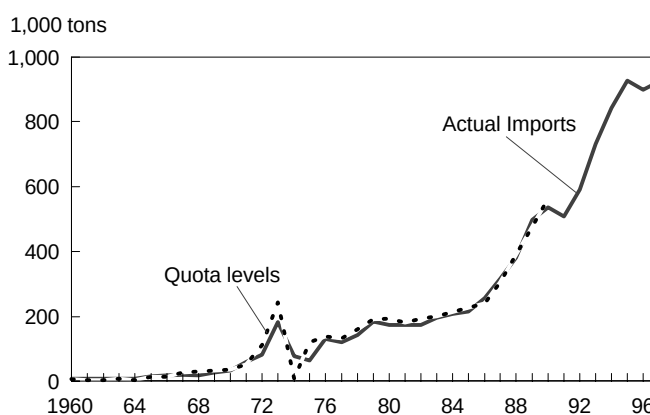
mouth free. Thus, the opportunities offered by Japan's beef imports—and the destabilizing effect of bans or disruptions of the imports—were shared by essentially three supplying countries: the United States, Australia, and New Zealand.

Imports grew in the early 1970's (fig. 1). However, when cattle raisers' feed costs soared as part of the global feed crisis of 1973-74, the LIPC imported no beef at all for almost a year in 1974-75, fearing that Japanese producers' returns would be squeezed between high feed costs and beef prices that would be lower if imported beef also had to clear the market. The ban meant that foreign beef producers suddenly were deprived of an important market.

### Challenges by Exporting Countries

According to Coyle (1983), "in the late sixties and early seventies, the import quotas on beef and citrus were high on the U.S. list of items requiring 'prompt and favorable' action by Japan." In 1975, after resuming quota imports, Japan announced a system of annual amounts to be imported from the exporting regions of Oceania and North America. This regional allocation of what had been a global quota disturbed

Figure 1  
**Japan's beef imports, 1960-97**  
(excludes imports outside quota categories)



Actual imports are Jan-Dec., carcass weight equivalent (USDA)  
Quota levels are April/March, shipped weight divided by .7 (ABARE)

exporting countries, especially when Japan cut in half a previously announced quota amount for Australian origin in 1976.

Negotiations with both the U.S. and Australian Governments resulted in expansion of certain categories of the quota in 1976 and 1977. The U.S. pressed for larger amounts under the quota for hotel use, and for a quota for “high-quality” beef, which was defined as grain-fed beef. A 1-year interim agreement in 1977 was followed in 1978 by a more comprehensive, 4-year agreement under the auspices of the Tokyo Round of multilateral negotiations under the GATT. The basis of this agreement was achieved as part of the Strauss-Ushiba understanding (between the United States Special Trade Representative and Japan’s Minister for External Economic Affairs) that settled a number of outstanding issues between the United States and Japan in the Tokyo Round.

The 1978 agreement defined annual, global quotas for each Japanese fiscal year, 1979-82. Although the total quota for 1979 was little higher than the actual imports for 1973 (the year with the highest imports until then), and total quota growth over the 1979-82 period was only 500 tons, the 1978 agreement provided a guarantee of minimum annual imports, ending the risk to exporters of unilateral reduction or cessation of the trade by Japan. In addition, the United States secured a commitment that a rising portion of the quota would be filled only by high-quality beef.

Because the U.S., Australian, and New Zealand commercial beef sectors compete with each other for the Japanese market, it is easy to imagine a scenario of diplomatic competition by the exporting countries’ governments to negotiate the biggest possible piece of the pie for their exporters. Japan showed an early preference for explicit geographic quotas: so much for Australia, so much for the United States, etc. But the exporting countries sharply rejected this approach. In these and later negotiations, the U.S. and Australian Governments realized a common interest in expanding general access to Japan’s market. However, they chose

to negotiate separately with Japan, while exchanging information frequently.

When the 1978 agreement lapsed (at the beginning of 1983), a new agreement was difficult to reach. After nearly 2 years of discussions, the U.S. and Japan agreed in 1984 in the Beef-Citrus Understanding of that year that the beef import quotas for 1984-87 would expand the high-quality portion by 6,900 tons per year. Later in 1984, a bilateral agreement between Australia and Japan expanded the total quota by 9,000 tons per year for the same years. The Australian-negotiated increase in the total quota was not in addition to the U.S. increase, so that much of the 9,000-ton increase was to be made up of high-quality beef. The 1984 agreement also dealt with citrus imports (including negotiating an end to grapefruit juice quotas).

The 1984 U.S.-Japan agreement committed Japan to “introduce a new measure...to facilitate consultations between foreign suppliers and Japanese users.” This led to the establishment of a subquota for the Simultaneous-Buy-Sell (SBS) system, which allowed direct negotiations between purchasers and sellers, so that companies could negotiate the size, quality, price, and timing of a purchase. This represented a considerable relaxation of the quota rules from the tender system employed by the LIPC in the rest of the quota, which could not easily accommodate immediate agreement between a specific user and a specific seller about a beef shipment. The SBS system was open to imports from all origins.

By 1984, there was a certain pattern to the revision of Japan’s beef import rules. Although there was some domestic pressure for greater importation of beef, the dominant pressure for liberalization came from the Governments of the United States and Australia. Prior to both the 1978 and 1984 agreements, negotiations were described at the time as intense, stretched over 2 years, and were not in place until over a year after the previous agreement expired. The United States, in both cases, secured concessions primarily for high-quality beef, which is the U.S. specialty. Australia worked for increases in the total quota. In both cases, these agree-

ments were realized in negotiations by the U.S. Special Trade Representative (Strauss in 1978, Brock in 1984) in the context of widespread tension about Japan's trade with its number-one export destination, the United States. Both agreements were for 4 years, and operated primarily through the state trading regime of the LIPC.

### 1988 Beef-Citrus Agreement

As the 1984 agreement reached its end in 1987, interest in Japan's agricultural import markets, including the beef market, was high. The surge in the value of the yen after 1985 sharpened the disparity between costs of food inside the protected Japanese market and in the rest of the world. Japan's burgeoning exports of nonagricultural goods led to very large current account surpluses with the United States, and to calls from the U.S. side for Japan to allow greater agricultural imports in order to lessen the trade imbalance. Within Japan, the Keidanren, an organization speaking for major Japanese businesses, called for greater agricultural liberalization. The Japanese Government appointed high-level committees of advisors, chaired by Haruo Maekawa, which issued reports in 1986 and 1987 calling for freer access to agricultural imports, among other policy recommendations. The Forum for Policy Innovation, a group of scholars interested in agriculture, openly advocated ending Japan's quantitative restrictions as early as 1978. While popular and political support for maintaining Japan's agricultural import barriers precluded unilateral liberalization by Japan, the argument that such barriers were burdensome to the economy as a whole was heard widely within Japan in the late 1980's.

Pressure from outside Japan was particularly strong in 1987 and 1988. The United States had pursued a case against Japan through the GATT since 1983, calling for Japan to give up its quotas on 12 categories of agricultural imports, including processed beef (but not chilled and frozen beef). By 1987, a GATT panel had ruled informally against Japan, which sought to block the formal adoption of the panel's report. This failed

and, in February 1988, the GATT formally decided that Japan should remove import quotas on 10 of the 12 categories. The ruling showed how vulnerable other Japanese quantitative restrictions, devised before the disinvocation of the balance-of-payments justification, were to international rejection.

After the expiration on March 31, 1988, of the 1984 agreement, bilateral negotiations on the level of Japan's import regime were difficult. The United States, Australia, and New Zealand complained to the GATT that Japan's restrictions on beef imports were unfair and in violation of GATT Article XI:I; panels were set up to hear the complaints of the United States and Australia. Given the growing external and internal pressure against the barriers to agricultural trade, it was regarded as likely that a new agreement would expand imports of beef. There were some expectations that U.S.-Japan negotiations would again result in an enlargement of the amount of high-quality beef to go into Japan under a new sequence of quotas.

However, in June 1988, the U.S.-Japan Beef-Citrus Agreement negotiated a phase-out of the quota system, from 1988-90, and allowed Japan to impose higher tariffs in 1991 and afterward. The 25 percent tariff effective in 1990 and before was to be replaced by tariffs of 70 percent in 1991, 60 percent in 1992, and 50 percent in 1993 and afterward. The U.S. opted for completely commercial trade, with no LIPC involvement, and no high-quality beef requirements. These provisions flew in the face of warnings from some quarters that the U.S. share of the Japanese beef market depended heavily on these levers. As in 1978 and 1984, other governments followed up in the wake of the U.S. action; subsequent agreements between Japan and Australia, New Zealand, and Canada basically followed the pattern of the U.S. agreement, and the GATT cases pending against Japan's policies were withdrawn.

The U.S.-Japan agreement also committed Japan to phasing out its quotas on oranges and orange juice, and to lowering tariffs on eight other horticultural products. As with beef, all these trade liberalization measures applied to other exporters. The annual trade value of the

products addressed in the 1988 agreement was \$1.54 billion, with beef comprising 72 percent of the total.

### Gains From the Bilateral Beef Agreements

It is difficult to establish by how much U.S. beef exports to Japan increased or U.S. beef prices rose as a direct result of the agreements, especially the 1988 agreement. It is unlikely that, in the absence of the agreements, Japan would have opted to increase imports unilaterally, or that the kind of beef actually imported after the quota's end would have been the choice of the LIPC anyway. It is more likely that the pattern of trade in beef shown by Japan's import statistics since 1987 has been heavily influenced by the trade rules it negotiated with the United States and other countries in the 1970's and 1980's.

The 1978 and 1984 agreements compelled imports of grain-fed beef. Such imports were not likely to have entered in large quantities in the absence of the agreements. Japanese domestic production was entirely grain-fed beef. Given that the LIPC was primarily interested in protecting Japanese beef producers, it likely would have had a predilection for importing grass-fed beef, for uses (such as hamburgers and meat processing) that would not directly displace Japanese beef. The effect of the high-quality beef sub-quotas negotiated in 1979 and 1984 was thus to force grain-fed beef, largely supplied by the United States, into a market that otherwise might have been closed. Besides the immediate advantage of greater sales, there may have been a longer-term effect of increasing awareness of U.S. meat qualities and business practices among Japanese companies, and, vice versa, of the Japanese tastes and business practices among U.S. meat companies and producers.

The imposition of the SBS system, negotiated by the United States in the 1984 agreement, served even more directly to familiarize the Japanese and foreign meat companies with the needs of the Japanese market and the abilities of exporting firms. U.S.-

origin beef achieved considerable success in the SBS subquota, and the 3-year phase out period provided for in the 1988 agreement involved steady expansion of the SBS system.

Behind the U.S. abandonment of the quota system in 1988 was a calculation that the system's advantages to the United States, which as Japan's most powerful trade partner enjoyed bargaining strength in determining quota sizes and composition, were outweighed by other factors.

First, it was believed that free trade would give more advantage to U.S. beef exports than the quota system could. The quota system distorted trade by influencing the types of beef imported and the timing of imports. For the U.S. beef industry, the lack of flexibility and transparency was a major detriment. The LIPC, a quasi-government agency, decided what and when to import based on criteria that were in part unobservable. As a protector of Japan's high-quality beef supply, the LIPC had an interest in seeing that imported beef was a cheap, generic commodity, not differentiated by quality.

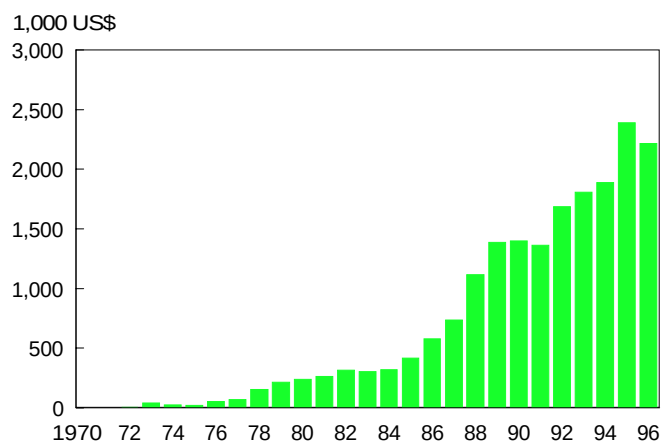
Second, the slow and painful process of renegotiating the quota system was a burden for the United States, and shifting to a permanent, fully open system would relieve the United States of this negotiating burden and let it focus on other issues.

Trade results from 1988 and after suggest that the U.S. position to completely eliminate quotas benefited U.S. beef exports. Japan's imports of U.S. beef and offals rose by almost 90 percent in value (compared with 1987) as the quota was phased out, 1988-1990. The increase of 95 billion yen (\$650 million, at the 1990 exchange rate—see figure 2) in the beef trade created a new plateau for U.S.-Japan trade that has been sustained or exceeded since then. Volume increased by over 50 percent in the same period. Total Japanese imports of beef rose by over \$1 billion (158 billion yen, at the 1990 exchange rate, from the end of 1987 through 1990—fig. 3), with increases in non-beef commodities adding still more trade. The U.S. share of



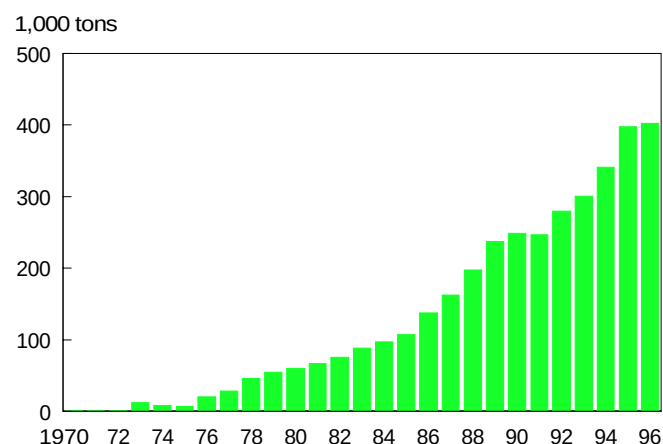
## U.S.-Japan Agreements on Beef Imports: A Case of Successful Bilateral Negotiations

Figure 2a  
**Value of U.S. beef and beef offal imports by Japan, 1970-96**



Source: Japan Exports and Imports

Figure 2b  
**Volume of U.S. beef and beef offal imports by Japan, 1970-96**

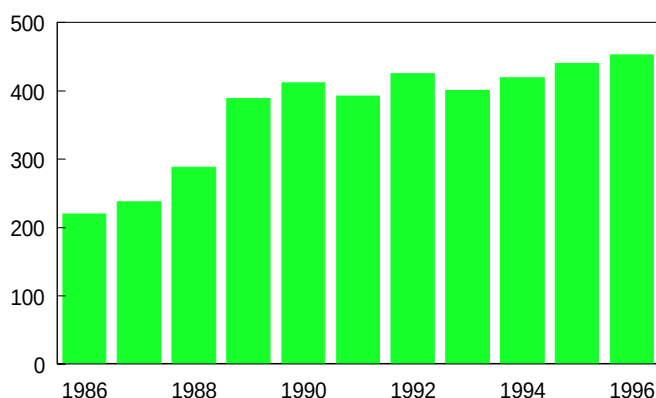


Source: Japan Exports and Imports, product weight.

the Japanese market has remained near its 1987 level of 61 percent of total Japanese beef import value (fig. 4—those imports formerly under quota plus the imports formerly brought in under the “offal” category). The U.S. share for the total package of goods in the 1988 agreement has also remained relatively steady. While the country shares of Japan’s market for imported beef changed relatively little, there were major shifts in the corporate makeup of the trade with

Figure 3  
**Japanese imports of beef and citrus**

Billion yen



Includes other minor commodities whose tariffs were lowered in 1988.  
Source: Japan Exports and Imports

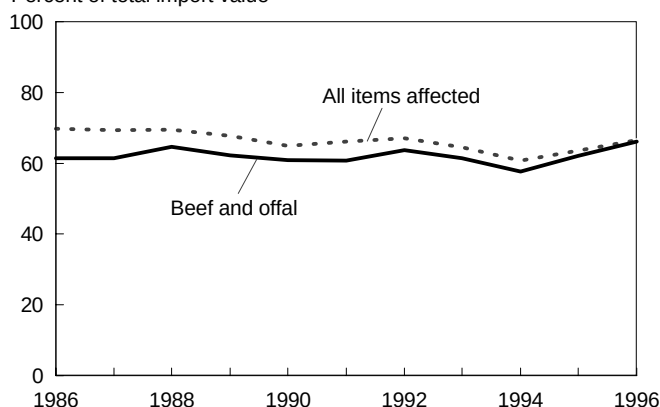
Japan. The 1988 agreement was followed by a period of great activity as Japanese and U.S. firms made investments in or established joint ventures and alliances in North America and Oceania.

The Japanese import market, freed from LIPC involvement, turned strongly toward imports of grain-fed beef (as Australia shifted some of its exports into grain-fed beef) and toward chilled, rather than frozen, beef (fig. 5). Chilled beef could compete more effectively with fresh Japanese-raised beef, and commanded a higher price. U.S. firms quickly developed and adopted methods of sending chilled beef to Japan by ship, rather than by air, reducing the transport cost substantially. The pronounced shift in the quality of imports illustrates the distortive nature of the quota/state trading system on trade before the agreements. In the 1978 agreement, the United States had deliberately forced a quality shift by negotiating a high-quality (grain-fed) beef subquota. In 1988, by forcing the removal of the quota altogether, the United States opened a door to another quality shift—chilled beef from the United States (Australian shippers had already shifted to significant chilled trade before the 1988 agreement).

Figure 4

### U.S. share of Japan's imports affected by beef-citrus agreements

Percent of total import value

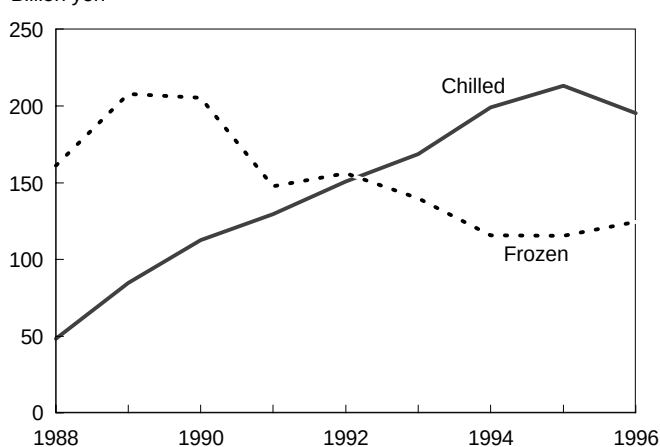


Source: Japan Exports and Imports

Figure 5

### Beef imports by Japan

Billion yen



Source: Japan Exports and Imports

The 1988 Beef-Citrus Agreement was imitated outside Japan. South Korea revoked its balance-of-payments justification for trade barriers in 1989, and the series of bilateral agreements on beef imports that it signed with the United States, Australia, New Zealand, and

Canada echoed parts of the agreements with Japan. An SBS system was set up and expanded, at the insistence of the United States. The Korean quotas were non-discriminatory about origin and type of beef. Korea's trade partners pressed repeatedly for a complete end to the quotas, and there were few U.S. voices in support of Korea's quota because of the successful U.S. performance after Japan's quota was phased out. While the end of the Korean quota system (set for 2001) was negotiated as part of the Uruguay Round (UR) settlement, the negotiations about it during the UR were often bilateral, and the details are contained in a side agreement with the United States formally attached to Korea's UR schedule.

Finally, other commodity spillovers can be credited in part as benefits of the U.S.-Japan Beef-Citrus Agreement. Although the beef agreements did not address Japan's trade barriers to pork imports, U.S. pork exports to Japan grew strongly after 1988 as a trade in chilled pork developed. Shipments of chilled pork used the technology and marketing channels that were opened up by shipments of chilled U.S. beef in the aftermath of the agreement. U.S. exports of chilled meat surged after the 1988 agreement, and this development likely occurred earlier than it would have if the beef quota system had been maintained.

## Costs of the Bilateral Beef Agreements

A major cost of the agreements was the negotiating time and negotiating leverage expended on them. Substantial amounts of time were required from staff of the U.S. Department of Agriculture, the Office of the Special Trade Representative, and the U.S. Embassy in Tokyo. U.S. elected officials faced repeated pressure from constituents to get greater access to the Japanese market. Other bilateral issues between the United States and Japan had to share the negotiating time and leverage with the beef issue.

Negotiating the beef issues induced political friction in Japan. Beef is a high-profile commodity in Japan, both

for producers and consumers. As with rice, voices within Japan emerged that suggested consumers could gain from freer imports, but farmers' protests against any liberalization of trade dominated the debate. As a result, Japan's Government found it costly to negotiate the agreements, especially the 1988 agreement. Japanese political leaders had to expend a lot of their influence to ensure acceptance of the agreements. U.S. successes on beef may have limited forward movement on other issues, because Japan's leadership had to be pushed hard to make concessions on beef.

Another cost of the 1988 agreement was the concession made by the United States in allowing Japan to raise its beef tariffs from 25 percent to 50 percent after an interim 2-year period with even higher rates. Particularly in 1991, the first year after the quota was eliminated, the 70 percent tariff seemed to depress imports from year-earlier levels. Subsequent negotiations in the Uruguay Round secured a reduction of Japan's beef tariffs from 50 percent in 1994 to 38.5 percent in 2000, accompanied by a safeguard mechanism that allowed snapback to the 50 percent rate in case of surges in imports.

The end of the quota also hurt trade that had sprung up to circumvent the quota. The United States dominated one such category, so-called "diaphragm beef," which enjoyed a low tariff and no quota control because the Japanese classified it as beef offal (on the basis that it was not attached to a bone in the animal, although it is a muscle meat). After the quota, this trade shrank in volume and value, but remained substantial.

Japan's beef production would likely have been larger without the increased beef trade generated by the beef agreements. Beef production in Japan is heavily grain-based, and relies on imports of feedgrains and oilseed meals. The largest supply source of these feedstuffs has usually been the United States and imports of beef reduced this volume from levels that otherwise would have been reached. However, beef exported to Japan from the United States and to a lesser extent from Australia was grain-fed, and increased beef exports to Japan led to greater animal

feeding in those countries. To a large extent, the location, but not the amount of feeding, was changed by the agreements. The value added to the feed inputs by cattle raising and beef production shifted from Japan to the beef-exporting countries.

### Bilateral Approach and Multilateral Approach

It is tempting to compare the bilateral approach with the multilateral GATT/WTO negotiations, and to consider the benefits and disadvantages of each. However, in the case of beef in Japan, the two approaches cannot be separated. Japan's controls on imports were globally acceptable to begin with because they were accepted in the GATT. When Japan gave up the underlying rationale for this acceptance in 1963 (by revoking its reliance on the balance-of-payments clause), the clock began ticking on its controls, with expectations that an increasingly rich country would reduce and eliminate them in order to credibly ask for freer access for its own exports to other markets. The 1978 beef agreements were negotiated simultaneously with the Tokyo Round of the GATT, and U.S.-Japanese negotiations on beef and the Tokyo Round were intimately connected—Japan's access rules on beef were one of the key issues to be settled before the Round could be completed, and became part of the agreement ending the Round.

While there was no formal linkage of the 1984 bilateral negotiations to GATT multilateral talks, U.S. complaints to the GATT in the early 1980's about specific Japanese trade practices not related to beef surely were one form of leverage that influenced Japanese decisions on beef. The 1988 agreement was negotiated after the beginning of the Uruguay Round, and in the context of the U.S. Government's professed commitment to completely free trade in agriculture. Thus, the U.S. preference for a complete end to quotas was based on a larger policy agenda, as well as strategic considerations related to beef markets.



The Beef-Citrus Agreement of 1988 may have influenced the outcome of the Uruguay Round. The boom in Japanese imports and U.S. exports of beef began immediately after the 1988 agreement, and showed its sustainability through 1993, when the Round was concluded. For U.S. agriculture, the successful performance of U.S. exports after this bilateral agreement, which allowed free trade to U.S. competitors as well as to U.S. exporters, could have rallied U.S. support for free trade in the Uruguay Round.

A report to Congress by the U.S. International Trade Commission (ITC) in 1988 explored the possibility of a comprehensive bilateral trade agreement with Japan, a proposal raised by the U.S. Ambassador to Japan, Mike Mansfield, and U.S. Senator Robert Byrd. Ambassador Mansfield made a statement that "...we should at least study the shape of a free trade agreement" because "the U.S. should switch from approaches which politicize trade issues, exacerbate friction, raise emotional stakes, erode public support here for American objectives and risk undermining both countries' commitment to the alliance. We have no alternatives at present to our piecemeal approach which could last—but should not—into the next century" (ITC, 1988). The ITC report, however, found substantial support for bilateral negotiating strategies among the experts it polled, with success in the beef and citrus negotiations singled out. Respondents also pointed out the threat of GATT action as influential in concluding disputes such as those over beef and citrus. While the beef agreements with Japan stand as successful achievements of bilateral negotiation, they arose out of and benefited from multilateral negotiations and agreements.

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