

US trade policy impact on the use of the upper 6 GHz band

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The upper 6 GHz band (6425 to 7125 MHz) is sought after for licensed mobile (IMT) use and unlicensed Wi-Fi (R-LAN) use. Lobbying focuses on explaining why mobile and Wi-Fi require more spectrum for capacity. The arguments put forward by the Wi-Fi lobby appear rational. However, the real motivation of the Wi-Fi lobby is to further US industrial interests, i.e. it has nothing to do with the need for additional Wi-Fi capacity.

Instead of working for harmonisation of spectrum use at global level through the WRC process, the US went ahead and assigned the whole 6 GHz band (5925 – 7125 MHz), i.e. 1,200 MHz to unlicensed Wi-Fi. This approach is consistent with the US approach in radio spectrum matters. The US has the scale and industrial might to go it alone.

The US is keen for the rest of the world to follow because this would further US industrial interests. Most countries agree that Wi-Fi requires more spectrum and in most countries 500 MHz in the lower 6 GHz band (5925 – 6425 MHz) has been allocated to Wi-Fi. The focus is now the 700 MHz in the upper 6 GHz band.

The mobile industry is dominated by Ericsson, Nokia, Huawei, and ZTE. Of course, the US, through companies such as Qualcomm, also has industrial interest in mobile, but the US has far more to gain by expanding Wi-Fi use. Lobbying regulators in other countries is purely driven by US trade interests; it has nothing to do with spectrum need.

Observers have long noticed that the Wi-Fi lobby, for example speakers at spectrum related conferences, are financed by US industrial interests. The most striking evidence that US industrial interests are the key driver is found in the “Agreement Between the United States of America and the People’s Republic of Bangladesh on Reciprocal Trade”, a trade agreement made in 2026.

Observers have long noticed that the Wi-Fi lobby, for example speakers at spectrum related conferences are financed by US industrial interests. The most striking evidence that US industrial interests are the key driver is found in the *Agreement Between the United States of America and the People’s Republic of Bangladesh on Reciprocal Trade*, a trade agreement made in 2026.

Ostensibly the agreement is about trade and tariffs. In its preamble the agreement states that the intention is “to enhance reciprocity in their bilateral trade relationship by addressing tariff and non-tariff barriers; and seeking to strengthen their commercial relationship through increased alignment on national and regional economic security matters”.

However, in Section 2. Digital Trade and Technology, article 5, the text states:

Bangladesh shall:

(a) open the upper 600 - 700-megahertz (MHz) of the 6 gigahertz (GHz) spectrum band (6.425 – 7.125 GHz) to license-exempt wireless/radio local area network (WLAN/RLAN) technologies for low power indoor (LPI) and very low power (VLP) device classes, consistent with International Telecommunication Union (ITU) Regulations; and

(b) within 30 days of official notification, consistent with International Telecommunication Union (ITU) Regulations, of the upper 6 GHz band being opened to low power WLAN/RLAN devices, open homologation process for certifying WLAN/RLAN devices operating in the 1100 – 1200 MHz of the 6 GHz spectrum band (5.925 – 7.125 GHz).

Essentially Bangladesh is trading access to US markets, for example for textiles, against how the upper 6 GHz spectrum is used in Bangladesh.

Given overwhelming reliance on mobile connectivity, in Bangladesh there is no plausible scenario that allocating the upper 6 GHz band to Wi-Fi (R-LAN) would generate a greater economic benefit than allocating it to licenced mobile (IMT).

Very high capacity Wi-Fi which might require additional spectrum is useful where Wi-Fi routers can be connected to a fibre (fixed) broadband connection. However, in Bangladesh, fixed broadband penetration is only 8.09%¹. Only around 9% of households own a computer. In contrast, 98.9% of all households in Bangladesh own at least one mobile phone², and most of these can be used for internet access. This is known to US trade negotiators. The US International Trade Administration states on its website that “of June 2025, Bangladesh had approximately 133.61 million internet subscribers, including 119.29 million mobile internet users and 14.32 million fixed broadband subscribers”, clearly stating that internet access in Bangladesh is dominated by mobile. Given overwhelming reliance on mobile connectivity, in Bangladesh there is no plausible scenario that allocating the upper 6 GHz band to Wi-Fi (R-LAN) would generate a greater economic benefit than allocating it to licenced mobile (IMT).

While fixed broadband penetration is growing slowly, mobile broadband connections are and will remain around ten times greater than fixed broadband connections. Allocating the upper 6 GHz to mobile would benefit between five and ten times more people (depending on whether counted at household or per capita level) compared to allocating it to Wi-Fi (fixed) use.

Connectivity in Bangladesh and other low- and middle-income countries is dominated by mobile. For these countries, particularly in Asia and Africa, allocating the upper 6 GHz spectrum to Wi-Fi will have negative economic consequences and make it less likely that these countries achieve their digital nation-building goals in a timely manner. The low penetration of fibre broadband in low- and middle-income countries means there is little value in allocating the upper 6 GHz for Wi-Fi use.

The US trade negotiators were clever to manage to insert the Wi-Fi clause in the trade agreement because US semiconductor giants like Broadcom, Qualcomm, and Intel design the vast majority of the world's Wi-Fi chips. It is unlikely that the Bangladeshi trade negotiators were fully aware of the implications of the Bangladesh digital nation-building programme.

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It is an odd state of affairs that a country trades off lower tariffs on its exports to the US against the use of spectrum. Countries and ITU regions (APT, ATU, ASMG, CEPT, CITELE, RCC) would be well placed to resist US pressure to allocate the upper 6 GHz band to unlicensed (Wi-Fi) use.

Even in the US, mobile operators are short of mid-band spectrum and research has shown that the vast majority of countries around the world would benefit from making 6425 - 7125 MHz available for full power licenced mobile (IMT). Furthermore, from an industrial policy perspective the EU and China have much to gain by supporting IMT use in 6 GHz because it supports their mobile infrastructure vendors.

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¹ World Bank, 2024

² Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS) ICT Survey