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THE INTERNATIONAL TREATIES & CONVENTION IN RELATION WITH TRADEMARKS

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ABSTRACT

This work investigates the evolution, scope, and impact of the major international conventions and treaties governing trademarks in the context of globalization, dynamic trade practices, and intellectual property law harmonization. The research highlights how the expansion of cross-border commerce and information technology has necessitated the development of an extensive international legal framework for trademark protection. Beginning with bilateral arrangements, the historical trajectory of trademark law quickly shifted towards comprehensive multilateral agreements to ensure uniformity and procedural efficiency.

Central to the study are foundational treaties such as the Paris Convention of 1883, which introduced principles of national treatment, right of priority, and independence of trademark rights among member states. The Madrid Agreement (1891) and Madrid Protocol (1989) revolutionized trademark registration, enabling owners to secure protection in more than one hundred countries through a unified application system administered by the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO). The Nice Agreement (1957) and Vienna Agreement (1973) standardized the classification of goods, services, and figurative elements, paving the way for more consistent international filings. The Nairobi Treaty (1981), the Trademark Law Treaty (1994), and the Singapore Treaty (2006) further harmonized legal standards, registration, and renewal procedures, reducing administrative complexity for international applicants.

Significantly, the study explores the role of the Agreement on Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS) under the World Trade Organization (WTO), which binds member states to minimum standards of trademark protection and robust enforcement mechanisms. The research also analyses India's progression in adapting its domestic law to comply with international conventions, particularly since becoming a party to the Madrid Protocol and TRIPS Agreement.

Drawing on primary sources, treaty texts, and recent academic commentary, this work concludes that international conventions and treaties have meaningfully advanced the protection, registration, and enforcement of trademarks. They have fostered economic growth, innovation, and consumer trust by establishing consistent legal frameworks adaptable to changing market realities. Nevertheless, challenges remain in practical enforcement and in harmonizing standards across diverse jurisdictions. The findings underscore the continuing necessity of cooperative international legal frameworks as commerce becomes increasingly global and digital.[1][2][3][4][5]

Keywords- International, "Intellectual," "Property," "Rights," "Country," "Protection," "Jurisdiction," and "Law".

Introduction

The increasing complexity and integration of global markets have made the protection of trademarks and other forms of intellectual property (IP) more important than ever. The value of knowledge and innovation has been magnified in the era of information technology and international trade. To strike a balance between economic development and protecting creative rights, nations have turned to international conventions and treaties that seek to harmonize, standardize, and reinforce intellectual property protection across jurisdictions.[5]

Initially, intellectual property rights such as trademarks were recognized and protected largely at the national level. However, as companies began to sell their products and services globally, inconsistencies in protection posed significant challenges. In response, countries adopted a series of international treaties to foster cooperation, establish minimum protection standards, streamline registration processes, and combat unfair competition.[4][5]

Evolution of International IP Treaties

The development of international conventions related to trademarks began in the 19th century. Early efforts were dominated by bilateral arrangements, but over time the benefits of multilateral cooperation became evident. Today, the international IP system consists of a web of bilateral, multilateral, and regional treaties administered by global organizations such as the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO) and, in more recent decades, the World Trade Organization (WTO) through agreements like TRIPS.[3][4]

Types of International Agreements

Bilateral Treaties- Agreements between two countries for mutual recognition and protection.

Multilateral Treaties- Broader agreements involving multiple nations, forming the backbone of the global trademark system.

Regional Treaties- Agreements within particular geographic blocs to harmonize IP standards and enforcement.

Main International Conventions and Treaties

The Paris Convention (1883)

The Paris Convention for the Protection of Industrial Property of 1883 is the cornerstone of international IP protection, including trademarks, patents, industrial designs, utility models, and more. The Paris Convention introduced several key principles that have influenced all subsequent treaties-[1][5]

National Treatment- Each member country must provide the same protection to nationals of other member countries as it does to its own citizens. This principle forbids discrimination based on nationality.[5][1]

Right of Priority- Applicants who file for trademark protection in one member country are given a period (six months for trademarks) to file in other member countries, during which their applications will be treated as if filed on the same date as the original.[6][1][5]

Independence of Rights- Granting or refusal of trademark registration in one country does not affect decisions in other countries.[4]

Well-Known Marks- Protection for trademarks that are well-known in a member country, even if not registered there.[6]

Unfair Competition- Mandate for each state to effectively prevent acts of unfair competition, including unauthorized use or imitation of trademarks.[4]

Trade Names and Industrial Designs- Trade names are protected without the need for registration, and similar obligations exist for industrial designs.

The Paris Convention currently has over 170 member countries, making its standards virtually global. Its implementation required many countries, including India, to update or overhaul their domestic trademark laws, integrating the Convention's core principles.[6]

The Madrid Agreement (1891) and Madrid Protocol (1989)

The Madrid System—a combination of the Madrid Agreement and the Madrid Protocol—allows trademark owners to obtain protection in multiple countries by filing a single application with their national or regional IP office. The process is centralized and administered by WIPO.[2][7][8][5]

Madrid Agreement (1891)– The original system, adopted by 25 countries but with limitations that discouraged broader participation (major markets like the US and UK did not initially join).[7][8]

Madrid Protocol (1989)– Updated the system to make it more flexible and attractive. Protocol membership is now over 120, and it is the operative instrument for the Madrid System, subsuming the older Agreement.[8][9]

Key Features–

- Single international application, in one language, with a single fee structure.
- Protection can be extended to any or all member countries.
- Changes (renewals, assignments, etc.) are managed centrally.[2]
- Domestic laws of designated countries still determine the final approval, but the administrative burden and costs are drastically reduced.

India became a member of the Madrid Protocol in 2013, facilitating international registration for Indian trademark owners and making India accessible to international applicants. Amendments to India's Trademark Act (notably the 2010 amendment) were necessary to bring Indian law in line with Madrid obligations.[2]

The Nice Agreement (1957)

The Nice Agreement established an international classification system for goods and services (Nice Classification) used in trademark registration. This classification-

- Organizes products and services into numbered classes (currently 34 for goods and 11 for services).

- Provides a standardized reference point for examiners and applicants, simplifying multi-jurisdictional filings.

- Is regularly updated by a Committee of Experts to reflect evolving trade.[10]

Although not every country is a party to the Nice Agreement, nearly all major trademark offices use the Nice Classification, reinforcing its global impact.

The Vienna Agreement (1973)

The Vienna Agreement standardizes the classification of the figurative elements of trademarks—such as logos, crests, or images—rather than words. It establishes systematic divisions and sections, facilitating searches and examination in trademark offices around the world.[3][2]

The Nairobi Treaty (1981)

The Nairobi Treaty focuses on protecting the Olympic symbol. As one of the world's most famous trademarks, the Olympic rings are shielded from unauthorized commercial use by all member countries.[2]

The Trademark Law Treaty (TLT, 1994) and Singapore Treaty (2006)

The TLT and the Singapore Treaty aim to harmonize and simplify national procedures and requirements for registering and maintaining trademarks.[11][12][13]

- The TLT restricts member states from requiring unnecessary formalities, facilitating applicants by establishing maximum requirements.

- The Singapore Treaty further modernizes procedural rules, addresses electronic communication, and updates the framework for recordal of trademark licenses.

Agreement on Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS, 1995)

TRIPS, signed under the WTO, is the most comprehensive treaty governing the minimum standards for all forms of intellectual property, including trademarks.[14][3][2]

TRIPS Requirements-

- Sets minimum standards for trademark protection, duration, and enforcement.
- Mandates protection for signs capable of distinguishing goods or services, including collective and certification marks.
- Calls for effective remedies against infringement (injunctions, damages, border measures).
- Binds all WTO members—over 150 countries—requiring domestic legal changes where necessary.[3][2]

Role of International Organizations

World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO)

Formed by UN treaty in 1967 and based in Geneva, WIPO administers the main international IP treaties, offers global systems for filing and registration, and provides technical assistance to member states. WIPO's databases, expertise, and dispute resolution panels reinforce the international protection of trademarks.[1][5]

World Trade Organization (WTO)

The WTO enforces TRIPS as part of international trade law, with dispute resolution mechanisms that allow for sanctions in case of non-compliance. Its involvement gives teeth to international IP obligations and makes trademark law an inseparable part of global commerce.[14][3]

Practical Impact and Challenges

These treaties have harmonized trademark law, expanded brand protection, and provided mechanisms to combat infringement. Companies can secure their brands globally with greater confidence and efficiency, reducing risks of bad-faith registration, counterfeiting, or unauthorized use.[15][5][4][6]

However, challenges persist-

- Variations in enforcement and judicial practice in different countries.
- The need for ongoing updates to treaties to address new forms of commerce (e.g., digital and cross-border e-commerce).
- Some countries are not party to all treaties, requiring dual-track national and international filings.
- Administrative bottlenecks, especially in emerging economies experiencing a surge in applications, such as India.[2]

Indian Context

India, a member of nearly all significant IP treaties, has updated its Trademarks Act and procedures to maximize participation in international agreements. This has made trademark protection more accessible to Indian businesses abroad and enhanced India's appeal as a destination for foreign investment.[5][2]

Conclusion

The international system of trademark protection is the product of over a century of cooperation, negotiation, and gradual legal harmonization. While national systems retain their relevance, treaties like the Paris Convention, Madrid Protocol, Nice Agreement, and TRIPS create a seamless, global framework that benefits rightsholders, consumers, and economies alike.

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