

## CROSS-BORDER CONTRACTS IN E-COMMERCE: A LEGAL AND PRACTICAL OVERVIEW

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*“Breaking Barriers, Building Trust: Contracts in the Digital Marketplace”*

**(History)** The emergence of e-commerce has revolutionized global trade, transforming how businesses and consumers interact. Historically, cross-border contracts were bound by jurisdictional limitations and complex negotiation processes. However, the advent of digital marketplaces and electronic agreements has enabled seamless transactions across borders, ushering in a new era of globalization. **(Present Status)** In the present context, cross-border e-commerce is booming, with platforms like Amazon, Alibaba, and Shopify facilitating trade. While these platforms have simplified transactions, the legal framework governing cross-border e-commerce contracts remains fragmented. Variations in contract law, jurisdictional challenges, enforcement of dispute resolution mechanisms, and the lack of standardized regulations pose significant barriers to international e-commerce growth. **(Short Explanation)** This research explores the complexities of cross-border e-commerce contracts, focusing on issues such as jurisdiction, choice of law, enforcement of electronic contracts, and consumer protection. **(Research Problem)** The research problem addresses whether existing legal frameworks adequately support the dynamic nature of cross-border e-commerce and ensure fair and enforceable agreements. **(Hypothesis)** The hypothesis posits that the lack of uniformity in global e-commerce laws hinders trust and efficiency in cross-border contracts. **(Possible Reforms)** Possible reforms include developing an international legal framework for e-commerce, adopting standardized contract templates, and leveraging blockchain technology for secure and transparent transactions. **(Aim and objective)** The aim and objective of this study are to provide a comprehensive analysis of the legal and practical challenges in cross-border e-commerce contracts and propose actionable solutions to streamline global digital trade.

**Keywords:** Cross-Border Contracts, E-Commerce, International Trade Law, Digital Agreements

### INTRODUCTION

#### i. Introduction

In today's digital world, e-commerce has transformed the way businesses operate globally. Companies and consumers can buy and sell products or services across borders with just a few clicks. While this has opened many opportunities for businesses to expand internationally, it has also introduced challenges related to cross-border contracts. These contracts are essential for ensuring

smooth and legally secure transactions between parties in different countries.

Cross-border contracts in e-commerce define the rights and responsibilities of buyers and sellers from different nations. They help businesses manage issues like pricing, payment methods, delivery terms, warranties, and dispute resolution. However, since different countries have different laws and regulations, businesses must carefully consider legal aspects before entering into such contracts.

One of the biggest challenges in cross-border e-commerce contracts is determining which country's laws will apply in case of a dispute. Since different nations have different legal systems, businesses must clearly state in their contracts which jurisdiction and legal framework will govern the agreement.

Many countries have strict consumer protection laws that require businesses to provide clear terms, refund policies, and fair practices. Companies selling internationally must ensure their contracts comply with the consumer laws of the target market to avoid legal issues.

### ii. Definition: Cross-Border Contracts in E-Commerce

Cross-border contracts in e-commerce refer to legally binding agreements formed between parties situated in different countries, facilitated through digital platforms or electronic communication. These contracts encompass transactions between businesses (B2B), businesses and consumers (B2C), and even consumer-to-consumer (C2C). The essence of cross-border e-commerce contracts lies in the virtual elimination of geographical barriers, enabling seamless trade through digital platforms like Amazon, Alibaba, and eBay.<sup>850</sup>

Unlike traditional contracts, cross-border e-commerce contracts rely heavily on electronic consent, digital signatures, and automated contract formation processes governed by platform terms and conditions<sup>851</sup>. However, these contracts present unique complexities, as they involve multiple legal systems, differing regulatory environments, and potential conflicts in applicable laws and dispute resolution forums. The United Nations Convention on Contracts for the International Sale of Goods (CISG) provides some guidance, but its applicability to e-commerce remains limited. Additionally, platforms themselves act as intermediaries, adding a layer of terms governed by platform-specific rules.

<sup>850</sup> UNCITRAL Model Law on Electronic Commerce (1996) with Guide to Enactment, U.N. Doc. A/51/162 (1996).

<sup>851</sup> United Nations Convention on Contracts for the International Sale of Goods, Apr. 11, 1980, 1489 U.N.T.S.

With growing global reliance on e-commerce, understanding the formation, interpretation, and enforcement of these cross-border contracts is essential for ensuring legal certainty, protecting parties' rights, and fostering trust in international digital trade.<sup>852</sup>

### iii. Importance in the Global Digital Economy

Cross-border contracts in e-commerce are fundamental to the expansion of the global digital economy, enabling businesses of all sizes to participate in international trade. In the era of digital globalization, e-commerce platforms have reduced barriers to market entry, allowing even small and medium enterprises (SMEs) to access global consumers.<sup>853</sup> These contracts facilitate international sales of goods and services, licensing of intellectual property, and provision of cross-border digital services, all of which contribute significantly to global GDP.

According to the World Trade Organization (WTO), e-commerce accounts for trillions of dollars in annual global trade, highlighting its economic relevance. Cross-border e-commerce, in particular, has grown exponentially, especially in developing countries where digital platforms create new export opportunities. Efficient cross-border contracts ensure predictability in terms of rights and obligations, payment terms, delivery timelines, and remedies for breach, all of which are essential for fostering trust in international transactions.<sup>854</sup> However, fragmented legal frameworks and the absence of harmonized global standards often impede the potential benefits of these contracts, creating uncertainty for businesses and consumers alike. Addressing these legal gaps can further unlock the potential of the global digital economy,

<sup>852</sup> Faye Fangfei Wang, *Law of Electronic Commercial Transactions: Contemporary Issues in the EU, US and China* 27-30 (Routledge, 2014).

<sup>853</sup> World Trade Organization, *World Trade Report 2018: The Future of World Trade: How Digital Technologies Are Transforming Global Commerce* (2018).

<sup>854</sup> OECD, *Unpacking E-commerce: Business Models, Trends and Policies*, OECD Publishing (2019).

promoting inclusive trade and economic development.<sup>855</sup>

#### iv. Significance of Legal and Practical Aspects

The legal and practical aspects of cross-border e-commerce contracts are crucial to ensuring their enforceability, predictability, and fairness in a complex global marketplace. Legally, these contracts must navigate multiple legal systems, differing contract laws, consumer protection regulations, and jurisdictional conflicts. Without clear choice-of-law clauses and well-drafted terms, parties face significant uncertainty regarding their rights and obligations. Legal frameworks such as the CISG, UNCITRAL Model Law on E-Commerce, and regional trade agreements provide some guidance but do not offer a comprehensive global solution.<sup>856</sup>

On the practical side, language barriers, currency differences, taxation complexities, and logistics (including customs clearance) pose considerable challenges. Cross-border e-commerce contracts often rely on platform-provided templates, which may not align with national legal requirements, especially concerning consumer rights and data protection. Inadequate dispute resolution mechanisms further exacerbate these issues, leaving parties with limited recourse in case of breach or fraud.

Addressing these legal and practical aspects through harmonized international frameworks, enhanced technological solutions (like blockchain for smart contracts), and clearer standard terms can significantly improve trust and efficiency in cross-border e-commerce.<sup>857</sup> Legal certainty coupled with operational ease will allow businesses and consumers to fully harness the potential of digital trade.

## HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

### i. Historical Background

Historically, international trade relied heavily on physical documentation, face-to-face negotiations, and extensive legal formalities. Cross-border contracts required detailed terms to govern payment, delivery, risk allocation, and dispute resolution, often customized for each transaction.<sup>858</sup> Differences in legal systems, language barriers, and uncertain enforcement mechanisms made international contracting complex and costly. Early legal instruments such as the Lex Mercatoria (Law Merchant) evolved to address these challenges by providing customary trade practices recognized across jurisdictions. Over time, international conventions like the CISG and regional trade agreements emerged to provide some level of harmonization in cross-border trade laws.<sup>859</sup>

### ii. Evolution of International Trade Contracts

The evolution of international trade contracts reflects the shift from localized paper contracts to globally recognized digital agreements. In early international trade, merchants relied on bilateral treaties and localized laws, requiring cumbersome negotiations for each cross-border transaction.<sup>860</sup> The development of multilateral agreements, such as the CISG, provided uniform rules for contract formation, performance, and remedies in international sales. The advent of electronic communication and standardized contracts further streamlined this process. Today, digital platforms have accelerated this evolution, with electronic contracts becoming the norm in global commerce, transforming traditional legal concepts like offer, acceptance, and performance.

<sup>855</sup> Thomas Streinz, Digital Megaregulation Unfolding: An International Legal Perspective, 115 AJIL Unbound 82, 84-86 (2021).

<sup>856</sup> UNCITRAL Model Law on Electronic Commerce (1996) with Guide to Enactment, U.N. Doc. A/51/162 (1996).

<sup>857</sup> Gabrielle Marceau, E-commerce and Trade Agreements: Crossing Borders and Boundaries, 22 J. Int'l Econ. L. 45, 48-52 (2019).

<sup>858</sup> Fritz Enderlein & Dietrich Maskow, International Sales Law: United Nations Convention on Contracts for the International Sale of Goods 17-20 (Oceana Publications, 1992).

<sup>859</sup> United Nations Convention on Contracts for the International Sale of Goods, Apr. 11, 1980, 1489 U.N.T.S. 3.

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### iii. Traditional Cross-Border Contracting Process

Traditionally, cross-border contracting involved extensive due diligence, lengthy negotiations, and the exchange of physical documents. Key aspects included defining the applicable law, jurisdiction, dispute resolution methods (like arbitration under ICC rules), and detailed clauses covering shipment, payment (often via letters of credit), and force majeure<sup>861</sup>. Each country's differing contract laws meant that parties often relied on specialized international trade lawyers to draft bespoke contracts. Language differences, variations in legal terminologies, and lack of digital communication tools added further complexities.<sup>862</sup> This process, while ensuring legal certainty, was often slow, costly, and limited to larger enterprises engaged in international trade.

### iv. Impact of E-Commerce on International Contracts

E-commerce has drastically altered international contracting by enabling faster, standardized, and cost-efficient cross-border agreements. Online platforms now provide pre-drafted contract terms, which users accept with a simple click, reducing negotiation time. Digital signatures and electronic records have replaced paper contracts, while automated dispute resolution systems offer faster remedies. However, this rapid digital transformation has outpaced legal harmonization, leaving gaps in jurisdiction, applicable law, and consumer protection. Platforms often apply their own terms and conditions, creating legal grey areas regarding enforceability and fairness. E-commerce has thus simplified contracting but introduced novel legal challenges requiring international cooperation.<sup>863</sup>

<sup>861</sup> Clive M. Schmitthoff, *Schmitthoff's Export Trade: The Law & Practice of International Trade* 55-58 (Sweet & Maxwell, 11th ed. 2007).

<sup>863</sup> Faye Fangfei Wang, *Law of Electronic Commercial Transactions: Contemporary Issues in the EU, US and China* 40-43 (Routledge, 2014).

### CURRENT SCENARIO OF CROSS-BORDER E-COMMERCE

Cross-border e-commerce has experienced unprecedented growth, becoming a key driver of global trade. The rise of digital marketplaces has allowed businesses to reach international consumers without the need for physical presence abroad. According to the World Trade Organization (WTO), global e-commerce sales surpassed \$26 trillion in 2022, with a significant portion attributed to cross-border transactions. This growth is fueled by factors such as increased internet penetration, improved logistics networks, and the growing preference for online shopping, particularly in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Platforms like **Amazon, Alibaba, and Shopify** play a central role in enabling this global exchange. Amazon, the world's largest online retailer, facilitates millions of cross-border transactions daily, providing infrastructure for payment processing, logistics, and dispute resolution. Alibaba serves as a dominant player connecting Chinese exporters with global buyers, while Shopify empowers small and medium enterprises (SMEs) worldwide to establish global online storefronts.<sup>864</sup>

Emerging markets, especially in Asia, Africa, and Latin America, are rapidly becoming important players in cross-border e-commerce. Increased digital adoption, coupled with evolving consumer behavior, positions these regions as both lucrative markets and active exporters, reinforcing the transformative power of e-commerce in international trade.<sup>865</sup>

### LEGAL FRAMEWORK GOVERNING CROSS-BORDER E-COMMERCE CONTRACTS

#### i. National Laws vs International Laws

Cross-border e-commerce contracts exist at the intersection of **national laws**, which govern domestic transactions, and **international laws**, which seek to harmonize global trade rules.

<sup>864</sup> World Trade Organization, *World Trade Report 2022: Digital Technologies and Trade* 12-15 (2022).

<sup>865</sup> Jason Oxman, *E-commerce across Borders*, 41 *Geo. J. Int'l L.* 749, 751-753 (2010).

National laws regulate consumer protection, taxation, and data privacy, while international laws (such as the **CISG**) provide frameworks for cross-border contract formation and enforcement.<sup>866</sup> This duality leads to legal fragmentation, complicating compliance for businesses operating across multiple jurisdictions, particularly where national laws conflict with international obligations.

## ii. **Relevant International Treaties and Conventions**

Key instruments shaping cross-border e-commerce contracts include the **CISG**, which governs international sales of goods, and the **UNCITRAL Model Law on E-Commerce**, which establishes rules for electronic transactions. While the **CISG** is widely adopted, its application to digital goods remains debated. The **UNCITRAL Model Law** provides globally recognized standards for electronic contracts, supporting legal recognition of electronic signatures and records, helping bridge regulatory gaps in digital commerce.<sup>867</sup>

## iii. **Role of WTO, UNCITRAL, and Regional Trade Agreements**

The **WTO** promotes global e-commerce through initiatives like the Work Programme on E-Commerce, addressing issues such as customs duties on electronic transmissions.<sup>868</sup> **UNCITRAL** develops model laws to harmonize digital trade regulations, including the **Model Law on Electronic Commerce and Electronic Signatures**. Regional trade agreements, like **USMCA** and **EU Digital Trade Rules**, also address cross-border e-commerce, offering regional frameworks to complement global instruments, enhancing legal certainty for businesses within specific trade blocs.

<sup>866</sup> United Nations Convention on Contracts for the International Sale of Goods, Apr. 11, 1980, 1489 U.N.T.S.

<sup>867</sup> Benjamin Wright & Jane K. Winn, *The Law of Electronic Commerce* 67-69 (Aspen Publishers, 4th ed. 2019).

<sup>868</sup> World Trade Organization, *Work Programme on E-Commerce*, WTO Doc. WT/L/274 (1998).

## **KEY LEGAL CHALLENGES**

### **1. Jurisdictional Issues and Choice of Law**

- **Conflicting Jurisdictions:** Determining which country's courts have the authority to hear disputes can be complex, especially when parties are in different legal systems.
- **Choice of Law Clauses:** E-commerce contracts often include governing law clauses, but their enforceability varies across jurisdictions.
- **Territorial Nexus:** Courts may apply local consumer protection laws if the e-commerce platform targets consumers in a specific jurisdiction.

### **2. Enforceability of Electronic Contracts**

- **Validity of E-Contracts:** Some jurisdictions still impose formalities requiring written or signed contracts, questioning the legal validity of clickwrap and browsewrap agreements.
- **Recognition of E-Signatures:** While UNCITRAL's Model Law supports e-signatures, many countries have differing standards, creating inconsistencies.
- **Evidence and Authentication:** Proving the authenticity and integrity of electronic contracts during disputes can be challenging in cross-border cases.

### **3. Consumer Protection in Cross-Border Transactions**

- **Varying Consumer Laws:** Consumer rights (refunds, cancellation rights, disclosures) differ significantly across jurisdictions, causing confusion for global sellers.
- **Information Asymmetry:** Consumers often lack clarity about which legal protections apply in cross-border purchases.
- **Access to Remedies:** Practical barriers (language, costs, enforcement) often

hinder consumers from pursuing legal remedies internationally.

#### 4. Data Privacy and Cybersecurity Concerns

- **Divergent Data Protection Laws:** Regulations like **GDPR** in the EU and **CCPA** in California create compliance challenges for platforms operating globally.
- **Cross-Border Data Transfers:** Legal frameworks governing data flow across borders are inconsistent, leading to regulatory uncertainty.
- **Cybersecurity Risks:** Cross-border transactions expose consumers and businesses to risks of data breaches, fraud, and hacking, raising liability concerns.

#### PRACTICAL CHALLENGES IN CROSS-BORDER E-COMMERCE CONTRACTS

##### i. Language Barriers and Cultural Differences

- **Contract Interpretation Issues:** Misunderstandings arise due to translation errors or differing legal terminology in contracts.
- **Consumer Expectations:** Cultural norms influence expectations around delivery timelines, refund policies, and dispute handling.
- **Local Business Practices:** Contract negotiation styles, communication methods, and legal formality requirements vary by region.
- **Multi-Language Compliance:** Platforms may need to provide terms and conditions, privacy policies, and disclaimers in multiple languages to meet regulatory requirements.

##### ii. Different Standards for Digital Signatures and E-Agreements

- **Legal Recognition Varies:** Some countries fully recognize digital

signatures, while others require traditional signatures for enforceability.

- **Technology Compatibility:** Signature technology (like **eIDAS** in the EU or **Aadhaar e-sign** in India) may not be interoperable across jurisdictions.
- **Authentication Standards:** Varying rules around identity verification and secure storage of signed documents create compliance complexity.
- **Enforceability in Disputes:** Inconsistent global standards make it difficult to predict whether courts will accept e-signed contracts as valid evidence.

##### iii. Currency Exchange and Payment Mechanisms

- **Currency Fluctuations:** Exchange rate volatility impacts pricing strategies and settlement amounts in cross-border contracts.
- **Payment Gateways:** Different regions have preferred payment methods (credit cards, digital wallets, or cash-on-delivery), complicating payment integration.
- **Transaction Costs:** Cross-border payments incur higher fees for currency conversion, international banking, and compliance checks (like anti-money laundering).
- **Refund and Chargeback Complexities:** Processing refunds or chargebacks across currencies and jurisdictions creates financial and legal uncertainty.

##### iv. Logistics, Customs, and Taxation Issues

- **Customs Clearance Delays:** Different import/export documentation and compliance requirements cause delivery disruptions.
- **Diverse Tax Systems:** Varying VAT/GST rates, import duties, and e-commerce tax rules add compliance burdens.

- **Supply Chain Visibility:** Tracking shipments across multiple borders with different logistics partners is challenging.
- **Product Regulations:** Some countries enforce strict standards on labeling, safety certifications, and packaging, requiring localization of products for each market.

### CASE STUDIES / EXAMPLES

#### i. Case Studies of Disputes in Cross-Border E-Commerce

##### Case: **Alibaba v. Alibabacoin Foundation (2018)**<sup>869</sup>

In this case, Alibaba Group sued Alibabacoin Foundation for trademark infringement in relation to its cryptocurrency services. Alibaba argued that the unauthorized use of its well-known brand name in cross-border e-commerce misled consumers, damaging its reputation. The U.S. court initially dismissed the case for lack of jurisdiction but later reinstated the suit, highlighting jurisdictional complexities in cross-border digital disputes.

#### ii. Legal Battles Faced by E-Commerce Giants (Example: Amazon in the EU)

##### Case: **European Commission v. Amazon (2021)**<sup>870</sup>

Amazon faced an **antitrust investigation** in the European Union for allegedly using non-public data from third-party sellers to gain a competitive advantage in its marketplace. This case reflects the regulatory scrutiny e-commerce giants face in cross-border operations, especially related to **data usage, competition law, and fair trading practices**. The case highlights the importance of harmonized digital market regulations within the EU to manage platform power in cross-border trade.

### POSSIBLE REFORMS AND FUTURE PROSPECTS

Cross-border e-commerce is evolving rapidly, but the absence of a **global e-commerce legal framework** creates legal uncertainty for businesses and consumers alike. A harmonized global framework, possibly led by organizations like **UNCITRAL** and the **WTO**, could establish baseline standards for contract formation, enforcement, consumer protection, and dispute resolution. This would significantly reduce jurisdictional conflicts and legal fragmentation, promoting smoother global trade.

Another crucial reform is the **development of standardized digital contract templates** tailored for cross-border e-commerce. These templates could incorporate globally accepted terms related to governing law, dispute resolution, data protection, and digital signatures. Standardization would enhance transparency, reduce negotiation complexities, and ensure better compliance for businesses, particularly small and medium enterprises (SMEs).

The **adoption of blockchain technology and smart contracts** could further enhance trust and security in cross-border transactions. Blockchain's immutable records can provide transparent proof of contract terms, while smart contracts could automate payment releases and enforce predefined conditions, reducing reliance on courts for enforcement.

Lastly, strengthening **Online Dispute Resolution (ODR)** mechanisms would offer faster and cost-effective redress for cross-border disputes. Platforms like **eBay** already use ODR effectively, and expanding such systems across global marketplaces would empower consumers and sellers, ensuring better access to justice in cross-border digital trade.

### CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study of cross-border e-commerce contracts reveals that **legal fragmentation, jurisdictional uncertainty, enforcement challenges, and varying consumer protection laws** pose significant barriers to seamless

<sup>869</sup> Alibaba Grp. Holding Ltd. v. Alibabacoin Found., 2018 WL 2022626 (S.D.N.Y. May 1, 2018).

<sup>870</sup>Case AT.40462 – Amazon Marketplace, European Commission (2021), available at [https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip\\_21\\_2061](https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_21_2061).

global trade. Existing **international instruments** like the **CISG** and the **UNCITRAL Model Law on E-Commerce** provide important guidance, but they lack universal adoption and are not always adapted to the unique realities of **digital commerce**. Furthermore, practical challenges such as **language barriers, inconsistent digital signature standards, and varying customs regulations** further complicate contract formation and enforcement across borders.

To address these challenges, **harmonization of global e-commerce laws** is essential. International bodies like **UNCITRAL, WTO,** and regional trade blocs should collaborate to **develop a unified framework** for cross-border e-commerce contracts, ensuring consistent rules on jurisdiction, electronic contracts, and consumer rights. **Standardized contract templates** could further streamline the process, particularly for SMEs.

Adopting **blockchain and smart contracts** would enhance transparency, ensuring secure, automated contract execution. Additionally, **strengthening ODR mechanisms** across platforms could provide accessible and affordable dispute resolution.

Future trends will likely see the rise of **AI-driven contract management**, greater regulatory focus on **data privacy and cybersecurity**, and increased reliance on **decentralized platforms** for global trade, transforming how contracts are formed, monitored, and enforced in the digital era.

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