



No New Deadline for TPP Deal, but End “Coming into Focus”

Leaders from the 12 Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) countries (Australia, Brunei Darussalam, Canada, Chile, Japan, Malaysia, Mexico, New Zealand, Peru, Singapore, United States, and Vietnam) met on the sidelines of the November 10-11 Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Summit in Beijing to review the work undertaken by their respective Trade Ministers and chief negotiators since last year’s APEC Summit in Bali.

The leaders’ meeting took place at the U.S. embassy in Beijing, since China, the host of this year’s APEC Summit, is not taking part of the negotiations. The aim of the meeting was to provide political impetus to resolve the remaining TPP issues. As such, U.S. President, Barack Obama, who described the talks as part of his top priority for the Asia-Pacific Region, urged his fellow leaders “to break some of the remaining log jams” in the negotiations.

“During the past few weeks, our teams have made good progress at resolving several outstanding issues (...) today is an opportunity, at the political level, to break some of the remaining log jams,” President Obama said.

“What we are seeing is momentum building around a Trans-Pacific Partnership that can spur greater economic growth, spur greater jobs growth,” Obama added, mindful of the political challenges involved in selling the TPP deal both in the U.S. and the other countries. The Obama administration has been trying to work with Congress to secure a trade promotion authority (TPA) which many claimed would have helped accelerating the negotiations. However this has met several roadblocks as many congressmen from the Democratic Party opposed the bill. However, many now believe that the recent mid-term election which has seen the Republicans taking control of the Congress may increase the chance to secure TPA.

In their report to leaders, TPP trade ministers, who met four times this year to advance the negotiations, stressed that they have been successful in limiting the number of outstanding issues which in turn has accelerated the pace of the negotiations.

“With the end coming into focus, ministers are strongly committed to moving the negotiations forward to conclusion,” the ministers reported. There are several areas where gaps still remain, they said, citing issues such as intellectual property (IP), state-owned enterprises (SOEs), environment, investment and market access.

On market access, ministers reported that “work remains on the treatment of certain products and with regard to certain countries,” in reference to the bilateral negotiations TPP countries are holding with each other and particularly the U.S.–Japan parallel discussion on agriculture.

Trade ministers also identified IP as “one of the most complex and challenging areas of the agreement”, but claimed to have nevertheless managed to make “substantial progress in developing common approaches that will promote creative and technological advances.” The same goes for the environment chapter on which they reported to have “made progress toward agreement on a set of enforceable environmental disciplines.”

“Concluding a complex and ambitious agreement like TPP among countries that are as economically, developmentally, and geographically diverse as those in the TPP is challenging,” the trade ministers acknowledged in their report. That being said, the group remains committed to making completion of the negotiations a priority and to redoubling their efforts “to get the agreement over the finish line, recognizing that substance will drive the precise timing of conclusion.”

In their own statement, leaders endorsed the trade ministers’ report and welcomed “the significant progress” achieved in recent months and agreed to the proposed intensive work program to complete the negotiations “as soon as possible.”

“We are encouraged that ministers and negotiators have narrowed the remaining gaps on the legal text of the agreement and that they are intensively engaging to complete ambitious and balanced packages to open our markets to one another, in accordance with the instructions we gave them in Bali a year ago,” the leaders said in a statement. “With the

end coming into focus, we have instructed our ministers and negotiators to make concluding this agreement a top priority,” the leaders said.

The 12 countries are expected to meet again before the end of the year, most probably in December, sources close to the negotiations said. As for the deadline for concluding the talks, observers say 2015 is looking more promising than

2014 given the apparent support from a Republican-controlled Congress for trade in general and for the TPA. Following the mid-term elections, trade has been identified as one of few areas where a positive collaboration could be struck between the Obama administration and the U.S. Congress.

KEY UPCOMING EVENTS

- TPP Ministerial Meeting, November 7–9, Beijing (China)
- APEC Leaders’ Summit, November 10-11 Beijing (China)
- WTO Regular Agriculture Committee, November 13-14
- WTO General Council December 10-11
- G-20 Leaders Summit, November 15-16, Brisbane (Australia)

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