

Obama Poised to Discuss Korean Trade Agreement, but Lawmakers Are Anxious

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With President Obama set to travel to east Asia next week, administration officials insist that he wants to secure congressional approval of a long-stalled trade agreement with South Korea, a high priority in Seoul.

But they acknowledge that serious hurdles remain on Capitol Hill, particularly amid concerns from U.S. automakers — notably Ford Motor Co. — that the agreement fails to break down longstanding barriers to the sale of American-made cars in South Korea.

“We remain committed to the U.S.-Korea free trade agreement,” Jeffrey Bader, Obama’s top National Security Council official for East Asia, said Friday morning at the Brookings Institution, noting the administration is working out additional differences with the South Korean government.

But, Bader said, a key issue is “adequate access for U.S. automobiles to the Korean market,” noting the “very political context surrounding trade” among U.S. lawmakers.

The George W. Bush administration inked the trade pact with South Korea in 2007, but the deal has yet to see action in Congress, where lawmakers have been increasingly reluctant to take up new trade deals amid reduced public support for trade and massive job losses.

Trade advocates say the United States is falling behind in trade relations with the region. South Korea signed a free trade deal with the European Union in October.