

U.S. preparing to revisit trade pact with South Korea

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WASHINGTON - U.S. officials are preparing for talks with South Korea to address autos and other concerns that have blocked approval of a bilateral free trade agreement, the top U.S. trade official said on Tuesday.

"We're working through all of that, both with Congress and (with other executive branch agencies) and then we'll sit down with Minister Kim," U.S. Trade Representative Ron Kirk said, referring to South Korean Trade Minister Kim Jong-hoon as he spoke with reporters after a speech on the Asia Pacific region.

The talks would give President Barack Obama a chance to put his own mark on an agreement that many Democrats view with suspicion, at least partly because it was negotiated under former President George W. Bush.

Kirk refused to say whether he thought problems with the pact could be resolved quickly enough for the White House to submit it to Congress for a vote in 2010.

But South Korea's recent conclusion of free trade deal with the European Union "creates a little more sense of urgency for us because we don't want to further disadvantage U.S. interests," Kirk said.

Kirk said the pact "was worth doing but the president has made plain we've got to get it right."

The United States signed the agreement with South Korea in June 2007. But lawmakers from heavily unionized auto-producing states in the upper Midwest immediately denounced it and Bush never submitted it to Congress for a vote.

South Korean restrictions on U.S. beef imports also created a huge political obstacle for the pact.

Obama opposed the agreement when running for president in 2008. But since moving into the White House, he has said he wanted to work with South Korea to fix it.

During Obama's recent visit to Seoul, South Korean President Lee Myung-bak said his country was willing to revisit auto provisions of the bilateral deal.

An influential U.S. congressman told reporters on Tuesday that South Korea must address a whole range of "non-tariff barriers" that block imports of U.S. manufactured goods.

"Up to now, there's been a stone wall from the Koreans," said Representative Sander Levin, a Michigan Democrat who chairs a key trade panel in the House of Representatives.

If South Korea is serious now about opening its markets to more U.S. manufactured goods, "we're more than willing to sit down," Levin said.

Steve Biegun, vice president for Ford Motor Co, told Reuters in an interview South Korea has actually "tightened the screws" on foreign automakers since the free trade pact was signed more than two years ago.

"The Koreans need to ... work with the brands to figure out how to facilitate the normalization of the Korean market. Because the Korean market is a perverted market. There's nothing normal about that market," Biegun said.

(Reporting by Doug Palmer; Editing by [Bill Trott](#))