

## South Korea bulks up on K Street as Obama presses trade deal

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South Korea has bulked up its lobbying roster to help the White House convince Congress to take up a controversial trade agreement between the two countries.

In the last six months alone, South Korea's embassy has signed four different lobbying and public relations firms to advocate for the trade deal.

South Korea's spending spree has taken place as Colombia and Panama have slowed down their activity on K Street as their trade deals with the U.S. have stalled in the Congress.

The South Korean agreement, in contrast, received a significant boost last month when President Obama at the G-20 summit said he wanted it completed before his November visit to Korea so he can present it to Congress soon after the trip.

Colombia once had a heavy lobbying presence on Capitol Hill. But last year, the Colombian government canceled contracts with lobby firms Glover Park Group and Peck, Madigan, Jones & Stewart. In late 2008, it also ended an agreement with Sorini, Samet & Associates.

Korea, by contrast, has hired several firms through its embassy.

It signed a \$20,000-per-month contract with Akin Gump Strauss Hauer & Feld in May, according to Justice Department records, as well as a \$25,000-per-month contract that runs until December with the Fratelli Group, a public relations firm.

The embassy signed lobbying firm Thomas Capitol Partners to a \$45,000-per-month deal that runs to December, and renewed a \$20,000-per-month contract at the beginning of the year with Parven Pomper Strategies, a lobbying group with ties to Blue Dog Democrats that is owned by Akin Gump.

The Blue Dog Democrats could be swing votes on all three agreements, which have divided the Democratic Caucus.

Business groups tied to Korea have also stepped up their efforts.

The Korea International Trade Association (KITA) hired Patton Boggs in September 2009 to lobby for the trade deal. The firm has already earned \$240,000 in lobbying fees from the business group, according to lobbying disclosure records.

Big-name lobbyists like former Rep. Bill Paxon (R-N.Y.) and Tommy Boggs Jr. are among the lobbyists helping Korea. Paxon, a top GOP fundraiser, lobbies for the embassy at Akin Gump while Boggs, the founder of Patton Boggs, lobbies for KITA.

South Korea's ambassador has traveled around the country to tout the free-trade pact, and the embassy created a new website in June to promote the agreement. South Korea is also sending a periodic e-mail newsletter to reporters highlighting new support for the agreement.

The Colombian Embassy backed away from K Street because it recognized that the White House's priorities were in passing the healthcare reform bill in its first year, not moving trade deals, according to an embassy official.

"We canceled the lobbying contracts because trade was not at the top of the domestic agenda and the administration was busy with other things. We felt it was important that we should be strategic with our resources, but we have never stopped working," said the official.

The official said embassy staff, including the Colombian ambassador, continue to have meetings every week with lawmakers in both parties on Capitol Hill to advocate for passage of their trade deal. Fratelli is also still doing PR work for the Colombian Embassy.

Like Colombia, Panama let go of several lobby firms last year. Akin Gump, Clark & Weinstock and Parven Pomper all saw their contracts with the Panamanian Embassy come to an end at some point in 2009. HDMK, a PR firm, still has an active contract with Panama, according to Justice records.

Bill Reinsch, president of the pro-trade National Foreign Trade Council, said the decisions by Colombia and Panama show their ambassadors are skilled Washington operators who know when to hold back the K Street blitz.

"It indicates some of these guys are more savvy about Washington than others," Reinsch said. "It shows that these foreign governments have a level of sophistication to know what the Congress may or may not be working on and to then cut back on their representation accordingly."

Reinsch argues that the South Korea trade deal was boosted when the Asian country reached a separate agreement with the European Union last year.

"A whole bunch of people pointed out to the White House that a lot of American competitors would have access to that market and leave us out in the cold," Reinsch said. "I detected a real nervousness from the administration on the Korea deal then."

That's not to say the deal will sail through Congress. Labor unions have lobbied against all three agreements, and the Ford Motor Co. opposes the Korean deal. It believes the agreement will allow Korea to send more trucks to the U.S., at the expense of U.S. workers.