

Key House Republican Plans Aggressive Push For Trade Deals

By Tom Barkley
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WASHINGTON -(Dow Jones)- A leading Republican lawmaker on trade issues vowed Monday an "aggressive" push in the House to expand into new markets, starting with the passage of stalled free-trade agreements.

Signaling a shift in the trade agenda as the House moves into Republican hands, Rep. Kevin Brady (R., Texas) said in an interview that a China currency bill would have little chance of seeing daylight, however.

Brady, likely to head the Ways and Means trade subcommittee when Congress convenes next year, said trade represents one of the few areas of opportunity for a "fresh start" between President Barack Obama and Republicans. But just in case Obama is unwilling or unable to demonstrate new leadership on trade, Brady will ensure that the issue remains in the spotlight.

"Trade has been in a lockdown in Congress for far too long," he said. "The trade subcommittee is going to open it up, because the more we do that, the more likelihood there will be a consensus among Republicans and Democrats on trade."

Given the unusually high volume of anti-trade rhetoric during the mid-term elections, including by Republicans seeking tea-party support, some business groups have expressed concern about eroding support for trade even in a Republican-controlled House. But Brady said he believes the pro-trade consensus will hold in the party, and he plans to work with freshman members to see that it does.

"The principals of trade are very much in line with tea-party candidates as well as traditional small bus freshman as well," he said.

Topping the agenda is passage of the three trade agreements that were held over from the Bush administration, with South Korea, Colombia and Panama. Brady and Rep. Dave Camp (R., Mich.), who is set to head Ways and Means, are calling for all three deals to be sent up to Congress for passage during the first half of next year.

U.S. and Korean trade officials are trying to resolve U.S. concerns on that deal before Obama's arrival in Seoul on Thursday. Brady said he has told the Korean government that Republicans and Democrats agree on the need to improve market access for U.S. autos and beef by the president's visit.

But voicing frustration that the administration keeps "moving the goal posts" on the Colombia and Panama deals, he said there is no reason why all three agreements can't be sent up to Congress together. The administration hasn't set a timetable on the Colombia and Panama deals, saying it is still working to resolve outstanding concerns related to labor standards and issues.

In addition to being "very aggressive" in building a case for the free-trade deals in committee work, Brady also plans hearings on a wide range of trade issues--from opening new markets through the Doha round of trade talks and Trans-Pacific Partnership to taking on protectionist measures like Buy America and the ban on Mexican truck crossings.

While Republicans share Democrats' frustration with China's policy of holding down the value of its currency, they don't view the yuan issue in a vacuum, he said. Republicans will take a broader view

of the bilateral trade relationship; including China's innovation policy, intellectual property rights, and raw material export restrictions.

Brady sees general support for the administration's multilateral approach to pressuring China to allow more flexibility. If the Senate fails to take up in the lame duck session a House-passed bill that would impose duties on Chinese imports in retaliation for the undervalued yuan, "I wouldn't expect to see that bill on the floor again in the House," he said.

He also called for the administration to resume bilateral investment treaty talks with China.

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