

Obama yet to decide to push FTA ratification

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WASHINGTON - The Korea-U.S. free trade agreement was discussed for the first time at a White House meeting during the Obama administration, a source told the JoongAng Ilbo.

According to the source, representatives from the State Department and the office of the United States Trade Representative called for quick and decisive push to complete the deal, but Rahm Emanuel, President Barack Obama's chief of staff, advised a "cautious" approach.

The source relayed that the principals meeting was held at the White House with economic and trade officials present.

Ahead of Obama's visit to Korea on Nov. 18, the Korea-U.S. FTA was near the top of the agenda.

During the meeting, the source said, the State Department and the USTR argued that the United States should actively engage Korea to ratify the FTA, which was signed in 2007. But Emanuel, who wasn't present at the meeting, expressed caution through a staff member in the session.

The meeting ended without reaching any conclusion, the source added.

The Korean Embassy in Washington has informed the Blue House and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade in Seoul about the meeting.

Another Washington-based source noted that there are differences of opinion on ratification of the FTA within the U.S. government.

"Unlike policy makers in the U.S. administration, Emanuel and other White House officials handling Congressional matters are against the quick push for the FTA ratification," the source said. "Where Emanuel stands on the issue has become important."

On the other hand, the source said it's significant that the FTA was discussed at the White House at all, "since it means the United States has begun looking into the deal in earnest."

And an official at the Korean Embassy here said the Korean government should move the FTA up the priority list.

"By next summer, the Obama administration and the Congress could lose momentum to deal with the Korea-U.S. FTA, since they will begin preparing for the midterm elections in November," the official said. "Korea should use the upcoming summit as an opportunity to push the FTA toward the top of the U.S. agenda, once Obama takes care of the health care problem by the end of this year."

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