

TPP Members Increase Negotiating Pace, Mindful of Japan's Imminent Official Announcement to Join the Group

The current 11 members (Australia, Brunei, Canada, Chile, Malaysia, Mexico, New Zealand, Peru, Singapore the United States and Vietnam) opened their 16th Round of Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) negotiations on March 4th in Singapore where about 600 delegates gathered to try to advance discussions on the agreement's 29 chapters during the nine-day gathering.

Discussions this past week have focused on various areas such as environment, customs, market access, rules of origin for textiles, as well as legal and institutional issues.

The pace of the negotiations is more intense given the October 2013 deadline set by leaders to complete the talks, one Latin American delegate said, adding that the upcoming rounds will be key in trying to assess the shape of the potential landing zones.

So far, progress has only been recorded in areas that are more technical in nature, leaving the toughest issues yet to be resolved. For instance, on market access, talks have primarily focused on disciplining the text rather than tackling the contentious area of tariffs. That being said, countries have held additional bilateral meetings on the issue throughout the week.

Japan

Even though the pace of the talks has somewhat picked up, the round so far has been influenced by the now "imminent" announcement of Japan's formal request to enter the TPP.

Since Japan's Prime Minister, Shinzo Abe, and U.S. President, Barack Obama's joint statement on the TPP following their February 22nd meeting, the speculation about Japan's official request has grown over the course of the week here in Singapore and trade observers believe that Japan will formally announce its intent to join the group by March 15, 2013.

Current TPP countries have agreed that the agreement would expand to integrate members of the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) and become a "pathway towards the Free Trade Area of the Asia-Pacific." Presently, the current 11 members collectively account for about US\$21 trillion in GDP. By adding the world's third biggest economy into the mix, the agreement would have a total population of more than 777 million people and represent about US\$27 trillion in GDP, making it one of the most important regional trade agreements of the moment.

The chief negotiators have had some discussions about how this will affect the process (e.g. the October 2013 deadline to conclude the talks), and most importantly, how it will affect the negotiating dynamic. There seems to be consensus that Japan would not be able to formally join before the August/September 2013 round at the earliest. And given this, which would more or less coincide with the current deadline of October 2013 (realistic or not), Japan's entry could further delay the conclusion of the talks.

Upcoming Events

- TPP Round XVI, March 3–14, 2013 (Singapore)
- Regular Agriculture Committee, March 26, September 4, November 12, 2013
- Panel of Experts' Report: "Defining the Future of Trade", early April, 2013
- Informal TNC (Bali Stocktaking), April 11, 2013
- APEC Ministers Responsible for Trade, April 20-21, 2013
- General Council, May 1-2, July 24-25, Oct. 8-9, Nov. 5-6, 2013
- OECD Annual Forum, May 27–31, 2013 (Paris)
- Deadline for Bali Deliverables, August, 2013
- APEC Leaders Summit, October 1–8, 2013
- WTO 9th Ministerial Conference (MC9) December 3–6, 2013, Bali (Indonesia)

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