

Obama on 'Secret' Pacific Trade Deal: Now You Can Debate It, Countries

U.S. President Barack Obama launched a defense on Friday of a signature Pacific trade pact kept largely under wraps and said the public would get its say before legislators in each country debate the full details.

The Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), a "mega-regional accord" covering four-tenths of global GDP, was so complex it would not have materialized if all interest groups were involved in the protracted talks, he said.

"If you are negotiating with 12 countries and there's no space for everyone to agree on the deal ... then it would never get done," Obama said during a town hall at a Kuala Lumpur University.

"The nature of the trade agreement is so many interests are involved, so what we've done instead is close the initial deal, it's subject to review ... each country then has to ratify and it's subject to the legislatures."

Obama was responding to a question from a Malaysian youth who said the TPP was elitist and excluded most voices.

Barring occasional leaks, details of the TPP have been kept secret during the more than five years of negotiations, angering those affected by its broad implications.

"I still have to get it past Congress," Obama added. "I believe it's a good deal and we'll get it done, but there's no guarantee."

The pact could come up against some opposition in Washington. Obama has long championed the deal but needs to muster support among moderates to ensure ratification.

He recently said it would allow the United States to “write the rules of the road” for 21st century trade, but warned: “If America doesn’t write those rules, then countries like China will.”

The pact covers countries from Japan, Canada and Australia to Mexico, Vietnam and Malaysia and would slash tariffs between them and set common standards on issues ranging from workers’ rights to intellectual property protection.

Obama used the U.S. pharmaceutical industry as an example of resistance and how concessions needed to be made.

“We were very specific in the chapter to say that we have to protect generics for low income persons,” he said.

“Here’s proof that this wasn’t just some giveaway to the drugs companies. Right now a lot of drug companies in the United States are mad at me because they said ‘how come we didn’t get more protection?’

“Well, part of our job is to promote the U.S. drug industry but part of our job is also to be good partners with countries that have people who are sick.” {eo}

(Reporting by Matt Spetalnick; Writing by Martin Petty; Editing by Nick Macfie)

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