



Secret trade agreement puts liberty at risk

By David Del Grande

Oct 17, 2013

By **DAVID J. DEL GRANDE**

In 2005, the Trans-Pacific Strategic Economic Partnership Agreement began negotiating an extremely secretive international free trade policy.

Eight years later, its membership, secrecy and controversy has quadrupled. The Trans-Pacific Partnership has trimmed its moniker but extended its constrictive reach.

Last year, the United States exported \$942 billion worth of manufactured goods to TPP member countries. That accounts for 61 percent of U.S. exports.

Twelve nations now participate in the free trade agreement: Australia, Brunei, Chile, Canada, Japan, Malaysia, Mexico, New Zealand, Peru, Singapore, the United States and Vietnam.

The United States officially became a member in early 2009.

“Boosting economic growth”

The Obama administration joined TPP to “boost U.S. economic growth and support the creation and retention of high-quality American jobs,” according to documents from the executive office of the U.S. Trade Representative.

The documents say that will happen by “increasing exports in a region that includes some of the world’s most robust economies and represents more than 40 percent of global trade.”

In theory, TPP can neutralize protectionism, lower trade tariffs and boost a blossoming nation's economy. Lowering trade tariffs can potentially cut consumer costs on education, prescription medications and legal services.

Why so much secrecy?

But mystery surrounding TPP's goals and progress has left many opponents leery. Why the secrecy?

It is practically impossible to learn the names of TPP's 600 corporate representatives. The public doesn't know when TPP members are meeting or what they are writing into law until after the fact.

Jim Hightower, contributing writer for truth-out.org, has written that U.S. involvement with TPP increases liability for issues such as food safety, outsourcing and massive restrictions on the Internet.

"Consumers could be assessed mandatory fines for something as benign as sending your mom a recipe you got off a paid site," Hightower said.

U.S. food safety regulations regarding pesticides, toxic additives and fecal exposure could be forced into substandard levels to avoid violating "illegal trade barriers" protected under TPP, according to Hightower.

Margaret Flowers, co-director of "It's Our Economy" and an Al-Jazeera English contributor, wrote on June 17 about TPP's great secrecy and high risks.

"The text of the TPP includes 29 chapters, only five of which are about trade," she wrote. "The White House refuses to make the text available to the public. In fact, the negotiators refuse to publish the text until four years after it is signed into law."

Supporters not worried

Simon Lester, analyst for the Herbert A. Stiefel Center for Trade Policy Studies at the Cato Institute, supports TPP and has faith in the negotiators.

"Looking at other trade agreements that have been signed in recent years, most trade observers have a pretty good sense of what will be in the TPP," Lester wrote in an article for the Huffington Post.

"A bit of secrecy is necessary to negotiate these agreements," Lester wrote. "Governments do not want to give away all of their objectives."

The China connection

China has recently been considered for participation in TPP, which could easily be perceived as a high-stakes chess game flavored with a hint of economic warfare.

Participation means China would enforce stricter labor laws, increasing production costs. If China is excluded, nations protected under TPP would enjoy the advantage of reduced trade tariffs.

President Obama cancelled plans to attend TPP negotiations in Bali, due to the U.S. government shutdown. He sent Secretary of State John Kerry in his place.

Critics say the president's absence at TPP meetings shows a lack of U.S. commitment and effectiveness in the international community.

TPP opponents wonder if influential lobbyists have indirectly deadlocked a U.S. budget proposal because a corporation involved in TPP negotiations wants the agreement to fail.

What's being negotiated?

The United States exported more than \$1 trillion to the Pacific Rim between 2009 and 2012, so why is a new trade agreement being negotiated with this part of the world?

And if fewer than one-quarter of the 29 TPP chapters are written about trade, what is actually in negotiation?

The only TPP documentation the public has seen came from an illegal leak, which makes this monumental trade agreement about as transparent as a super-max prison cell.

Harmful secrets are kept by regimes and people who don't deserve the position they hold.

The secrecy of TPP goals and negotiations is perjurious. Because our liberties are at stake, we deserve access to the information.