

Senators urge Obama push for Korea trade deal

Washington Post
April 21, 2009

WASHINGTON - Two senior U.S. senators urged President Barack Obama on Monday to begin "the hard work" of passing a free trade agreement with South Korea that he opposed during last year's campaign.

North Korea's recent missile launch and "statements that it will resume its nuclear program demonstrate yet again the threat that North Korea poses in the northeast Asian region," Senate Finance Committee Chairman Max Baucus and Senator Charles Grassley said in a letter to Obama.

"In the face of this threat, it is vital that the United States maintain and expand its strong and proven partnership with the Republic of Korea," Baucus, a Democrat, and Grassley, the top Republican on the Finance panel, said.

Obama called during last year's campaign for the South Korean agreement to be renegotiated to include more favorable provisions for U.S. automakers and other manufacturers.

Critics of the pact complain that it removes the few remaining U.S. tariffs on South Korean automobiles, while doing little to dismantle "non-tariff barriers" that keep U.S. automobiles out of Korea.

U.S. Trade Representative Ron Kirk recently said the United States was prepared to walk away from the agreement if Seoul was unwilling to address U.S. concerns.

Baucus and Grassley said they understood the Obama administration was likely to focus first on winning approval of free trade pacts with Colombia and Panama.

"At the same time, we also urge you to begin the hard work of winning broad approval of the U.S.-Korea FTA without delay," they said. Waiting to address concerns about autos and South Korea's reluctance to fully reopen its market to U.S. beef will not make those issues easier to resolve, they added.