

# U.S. Trade Chief Says Obama Will Push Ahead on Pacts

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WASHINGTON — In his first policy speech, the top United States trade official said Thursday that President Obama would work to revive global trade talks and complete three bilateral accords as part of an aggressive trade agenda.

The administration plans “a new paradigm” on trade, the trade representative, Ron Kirk, told an audience at Georgetown University. “We’re looking at everything,” he said.

Rejecting fears of a turn to protectionism or a softening of support for free trade, Mr. Kirk said: “Now is not the time to turn inward. Now is not the time to be timid. Now is the time to revive global trade.”

Mr. Kirk vowed to press ahead on three bilateral trade agreements negotiated by the Bush administration. He said there was strong bipartisan support in Congress for an agreement with Panama — suggesting that its completion might come first — but that the administration was also working to advance the somewhat more controversial pacts with Colombia and South Korea.

Mr. Obama had criticized Colombia during his presidential campaign because of violence there against labor activists. But his administration has pointed to progress there since then.

On the accord with Seoul, United States auto manufacturers question whether it would adequately open South Korea’s auto market.

Mr. Kirk also said Thursday that he would consult with fellow World Trade Organization members about “proactive, positive options” for reviving the Doha round of global trade negotiations, which broke down in July over differences between advanced and developing countries on agriculture.

Frank Vargo, vice president for international affairs of the National Association of Manufacturers, welcomed Mr. Kirk’s specificity in saying that fast-developing countries — like China, Brazil and India, though he did not name them — needed to show a willingness to work toward a Doha compromise.

Mr. Kirk, he said, “makes it plain that the less-developing countries are going to have to step up to the plate and do more.” Mr. Vargo’s group supports that approach. He said he was heartened by the sense that “the U.S. is going to be exercising strong leadership” on Doha.

Despite deep skepticism about prospects for reviving Doha, Mr. Vargo said that the global economic crisis might change that. Countries like Brazil, India and China should realize, he said, that “if the world turns protectionist, it’ll be against them. They need a successful Doha round.”

But Mr. Kirk promised strong support for trade with the poorer developing countries.

He also said he would rigorously enforce trade agreements and help protect American workers who lose jobs because of trade.

His promise to increase export efforts by small- and medium-size American companies represented a first from a United States trade representative, Mr. Vargo said.

Mr. Kirk earned a reputation as a free trade advocate in Dallas, where he joined other political leaders in calling in 2000 for permanently normalizing trade relations with China, which Congress voted the following year to do.

But his specific views on current trade issues are not yet well known. The president is being tugged in competing directions by pro-trade forces in both parties and by labor and environmental advocates, largely on the Democratic side.

“Their dilemma is, no matter what they do they’re going to get hit by a fairly significant number of people,” said William A. Reinsch, president of the National Foreign Trade Council. But as a former trade official in the Clinton administration, he suggested the best approach was simply to chart a course and move ahead.

Some of Mr. Obama’s campaign talk has also raised concerns among trade supporters. Tapping into antitrade feelings in critical states during the campaign, he had criticized the North American Free Trade Agreement.

But American exports have fallen 16 percent during the current economic crisis, as Mr. Kirk noted, and Mr. Obama has joined world leaders in cautioning against protectionism.