

# U.S. Eyes Asia Trade Vistas After Panama, Doha: Kirk

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WASHINGTON (Reuters) - The Obama administration wants to explore new trade vistas in the Asia-Pacific region once it has dealt with challenges it inherited, including a deal with Panama and a global trade pact, U.S. Trade Representative Ron Kirk said on Monday.

Kirk said President Barack Obama's administration was working "furiously" to resolve outstanding issues with Panama, and was committed to concluding the long-stalled Doha round of global trade talks, launched in 2001.

But in a speech to the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, and in a brief chat with reporters afterward, Kirk expressed a desire to get beyond Doha and other pending agreements and onto other projects, especially in Asia.

"If you look at where the economy is going, I think you have to be led to the extraordinary potential there is for us to grow -- in a bilateral or multilateral environment -- market access in the Asia-Pacific (region)," Kirk told reporters.

He said U.S. officials want to develop "a more thoughtful relationship" with China concerning trade. Hopefully there could be a meeting of the U.S.-China Joint Commission on Commerce and Trade before Obama meets Chinese President Hu Jintao later this year, Kirk told reporters.

In his speech to the Chamber of Commerce, Kirk said U.S. officials who were in Panama recently for talks had very productive discussions on labor and tax issues that have barred completion of a free trade agreement.

**'WORKING FURIOUSLY'**

"We're working furiously to finalize the Panama free trade agreement," he said.

He did not offer a timeline for submitting a completed deal to the U.S. Congress for a vote. Some key Democrats want the concerns about Panama's tax and labor laws completely resolved first.

Once a trade pact is formally submitted to Congress, lawmakers have 90 days to approve or reject the agreement without making changes.

As for the stalled Doha round of global trade talks, Kirk said success could help breathe new life into the world's economies. Success meant "a balanced and ambitious agreement with meaningful market access gains for all involved."

"We're asking all 153 WTO (World Trade Organization) members to be willing to consider whatever adjustments are necessary to put us on a straighter path to success," he said.

The Doha round was launched in late 2001 with the goal of helping poor countries prosper through trade. Countries came close to a deal last year, but the effort collapsed.

"Concluding the Doha negotiations will allow us to turn our attention to new vistas on the trade agenda," Kirk said.

One of his personal goals is to look at U.S. trade policy toward Asia, working to finish a deal with South Korea and engaging China, he said. He said he had a "productive and friendly" meeting recently with China's Commerce Minister Chen Deming.

Talking to reporters, Kirk spoke positively about the Transpacific Partnership (TPP), an initiative launched by the Bush administration that envisions negotiating new free trade agreements with New Zealand and Brunei, and linking them to existing pacts with Singapore and Chile.

"At a minimum we would pick that up," he said of the TPP. "But what I would like to do, and what we have done, is stop and take a holistic look at all of our trade policy."