

Obama's covert trade deal

Lori Wallach
Ben Beachy

WASHINGTON The Obama administration has often stated its commitment to open government. So why is it keeping such tight wraps on the contents of the Trans-Pacific Partnership, the most significant international commercial agreement since the creation of the World Trade Organization in 1995?

The pact, under negotiation since 2008, would set new rules for everything from food safety and financial markets to medicine prices and Internet freedom. It would include at least 12 of the countries bordering the Pacific and be open for more to join. President Obama has said he wants to sign it by October.

From another leak, we know the pact would also take aim at policies to control the cost of medicine. Pharmaceutical companies have long lobbied against government efforts to keep the cost of medicines down. Under the agreement,

they could challenge such measures by claiming that they undermined their new rights granted by the deal.

And yet another leak revealed that the deal would include even more expansive incentives to relocate

domestic manufacturing offshore than were included in Nafta — a deal that drained millions of manufacturing jobs from the American economy. The agreement would also be a boon for

Although Congress has exclusive authority to set the terms of trade, the executive branch has resisted repeated requests by members of Congress to see the text of the draft agreement and has denied requests from members to attend negotiations as observers.

While the agreement could rewrite broad sections of non-trade policies affecting Americans' daily lives, the administration also has rejected demands by outside groups that the nearly complete text be publicly released. Even the George W. Bush administration, hardly a paragon of transparency, published online the draft text of the last similarly sweeping agreement, called the Free Trade Area of the Americas, in 2001.

There is one exception to this wall of secrecy: a group of some 600 trade "advisers," dominated by representatives of big businesses, who enjoy privileged

access to draft texts and negotiators.

This covert approach is a major problem because the agreement is more than just a trade deal. Only 5 of its 29 chapters cover traditional trade matters, like tariffs or quotas. The others impose parameters on nontrade policies. Existing and future American laws must be altered to conform with these terms, or trade sanctions can be imposed against American exports.

Remember the debate in January 2012 over the Stop Online Piracy Act, which would have imposed harsh penalties for even the most minor and inadvertent infraction of a company's copyright? The ensuing uproar derailed the proposal. But now, the very corporations behind SOPA are at it again, hoping to reincarnate its terms within the Trans-Pacific Partnership's sweeping proposed copyright provisions.

could make the deal impossible to sign.

Michael Froman, nominated to be Mr. Kirk's replacement, will most likely become the public face of the administration's very private negotiations. As someone whose professional experience has been during the Internet era, he must know that such extreme secrecy is bound to backfire.

Whatever one thinks about "free trade," the secrecy of the Trans-Pacific Partnership process represents a huge assault on the principles and practice of democratic governance. That is untenable in the age of transparency, especially coming from an administration that is otherwise so quick to trumpet its commitment to open government.

LORI WALLACH is the director of Public Citizen's Global Trade Watch, where **BEN BEACHY** is the research director.

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Regional Office, Asia-Pacific: #1201, 191 Java Road, Hong Kong Tel: +852 2922 1188 Fax: +852 2922 1190 The Americas: Regional Office, 620 Eighth Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10018 Ad U.K.: Advertising Office, 1 New Oxford Street, London WC1A 1NU Tel: +44 20 7061 3500 Fax: +44 20 7061 3529
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