

U.S. Exit From Trans-Pacific Partnership Buoy Critics in Asia

As some countries seek to keep TPP alive, a reminder that some groups there oppose growth of free trade, too

By Rob Taylor and Mitsuru Obe

President Donald Trump's decision to remove the U.S. from the Trans-Pacific Partnership is encouraging critics of the pact around Asia while some countries look for ways to keep it alive.

It is a reminder that there are groups in Asia that oppose the growth of free trade, just as their counterparts in the U.S. and elsewhere have done, potentially complicating the pursuit of other trade agreements.

Australia's government, for instance, said it would try to revive the TPP, possibly as a free-trade pact among some or all of the remaining 11 nations, even possibly including China. But lawmakers opposed to the agreement said Mr. Trump had done the country a favor.

"TPP is dead. And so it should be. It was a bad deal cooked up by big corporations to benefit them, not the people," said Sarah Hanson-Young, a lawmaker for the Greens, Australia's third-largest political party and an influential voice in the Senate, where the government doesn't hold a majority.

In Japan, grass-roots opposition to the TPP has also grown. In Tokyo's western suburbs, city assembly member Yuko Sasaoka has organized a campaign to demonstrate the potential impact of free-trade deals on local communities, especially the effect that multinational corporations might have on small businesses.

In Ms. Sasaoka's city, Musashino, meals at public schools are made with locally produced food. Local firms are treated favorably in public-work contracts, while large retail stores need to contribute to community-revitalization efforts before they can open an outlet — all with the goal of raising awareness about the possible effects of unhindered trade.

Ms. Sasaoka said Mr. Trump's decision to take the U.S. out of the TPP was encouraging. "I don't necessarily support everything he says, but as far as the TPP is concerned, I am with him," she said.

In Malaysia, some opposition politicians argued that overly ambitious free-trade pacts could render local firms uncompetitive if they can't adapt quickly enough. Wong Chen, an opposition member of Parliament, said in a post on his Facebook page that Malaysia should limit its trade negotiations to bilateral agreements that focus on market access and the removal of tariffs. "Stick to the basics," he wrote.

One of the biggest flashpoints in Australia was the effect the TPP might have had on the availability of cheaper pharmaceuticals. U.S. officials were pushing for longer patent protections on certain drugs. Opponents of the pact also said that a provision allowing companies to

challenge government rules would have threatened Australian laws that require tobacco companies to use drab packaging to discourage smoking.

“TPP gave corporations the right to sue the government for enacting laws that represent the will of the people.” Sen. Hanson-Young said, calling it “fundamentally undemocratic.” Efforts to keep the pact alive without the U.S., she said, would amount to resuscitation of a “zombie deal.”

The opposition Labor party said that pursuing the TPP without the U.S. makes no sense.

Bob Katter, an independent lawmaker in the lower house said both Australia’s major parties had for years pursued free trade like a form of “religious fundamentalism.”

“The TPP would be the destruction of our sovereignty in Australia,” said Mr. Katter, a critic of free-trade pacts with Japan, South Korea and China concluded by the conservative government. “The U.S. has repeatedly had interventionist policies.”

And back in Japan, concern is building in some quarters that if Tokyo seeks a bilateral trade deal with the U.S., the U.S. might look for more concessions than it did under the Obama administration.

“Of course, it is too early to cheer,” Ms. Sasaoka said. “Mr. Trump advocates ‘America First’ He might demand more liberalization of Japan than under the TPP.”