

Japan: Gov't decides to join Pacific free trade talks despite resistance

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TOKYO (Kyodo) — The Japanese government decided Friday to join talks on a Pacific free trade agreement with a view to boosting the country's sluggish economy, fending off opposition from within the ruling party amid concern that the U.S.-backed tariff-cutting pact could adversely affect farmers and various sectors of everyday life.

The participation of the world's third-largest economy in the Trans-Pacific Partnership negotiations will add weight to the regional economic initiative, while some experts hope the move will lead to an overhaul of the country's faltering agricultural sector.

The government is rushing to jump on the bandwagon as the talks are already in full swing, with trade ministers from the nine countries agreeing Thursday in Hawaii to forge a broad outline of the TPP agreement on the sidelines of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation forum summit.

While Noda has shown a positive stance on Japan taking part in the talks since taking office in September, the issue has divided not only public opinion but also lawmakers of the ruling Democratic Party of Japan.

The TPP originated in a free trade undertaking among Brunei, Chile, New Zealand and Singapore, and negotiations are under way to expand the framework by including major agricultural exporters such as the United States and Australia as well as Malaysia, Peru and Vietnam.

Japan's business community insists that the agreement will help to increase exports by auto and electrical machinery makers, but strong concern remains about Japan drastically opening up its heavily protected agricultural market, as the TPP would require member economies in principle to eventually scrap all tariffs.

Farm minister Michihiko Kano said Friday that it will be "extremely difficult" for Japan to set exceptions to the removal of tariffs on sensitive items such as rice, as it has done in past bilateral FTAs with other countries.

Fears over how the TPP would affect the country have also spread beyond the farm industry, given that various other areas, such as those related to food safety, medical and financial services, and government procurement are also on the agenda.

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<http://mdn.mainichi.jp/mdnnews/national/archive/news/2011/11/11/20111111p2g00m0dm135000c.html>

Cannes, France, Nov. 4 (Jiji Press)—Japanese Prime Minister Yoshihiko Noda indicated Friday that he will decide before the upcoming APEC summit that his country will join Trans-Pacific Partnership free trade talks.

Noda, who is believed to support Japan's participation in the talks, told reporters here on the sidelines of a summit of the Group of 20 developed and emerging economies that eventually, his political decision is needed on the TPP issue.

The Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation forum summit will kick off in Hawaii on Nov. 12.

After a project team of his ruling Democratic Party of Japan finishes discussing the issue and relevant ministers work to reach a consensus, representatives of the government and the DPJ are to decide whether Japan should join talks on the expansion of the TPP agreement, Noda said.

Noda brushed aside the view that Japan can withdraw from the talks after joining them, saying that it is a basic stance to make every effort to realize Japan's national interests in the talks.

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<http://jen.jiji.com/jc/eng?g=eco&k=2011110500030>
