

How to Boost U.S. Exports

Congress Should Ease Business Travel in Asia

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As U.S. Ambassador in Singapore I have a great view of the issues facing Americans doing business in Asia. Singapore is a base of operations for approximately 1,500 U.S. companies. Many of those American businesses cover countries throughout Asia from their offices here. The ability of those companies to bring American goods and services to market in Asia will determine the success of the President's National Export Initiative, which was announced in the State of the Union Address this year.

The President's export initiative establishes the goal of doubling American exports of goods and services in the next five years. The effort promises to create millions of good jobs in the United States. With more than 580 million consumers in Southeast Asia alone, unquestionably, the emerging markets here are central to the success of the effort. The heavy lift of meeting the ambitious goal of the NEI depends primarily on the determination and abilities of the private sector. But success also requires swift and strong support from Washington.

In my time leading the U.S. Embassy in Singapore it has become clear to me that an important, but relatively easy way Congress can support the NEI is to ease the movement of our country's business travelers throughout Asia by passing S. 1633/H.R. 3192, the "Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation Business Travel Cards Act of 2009." The APEC Business Travel Card (ABTC) was established to boost travel for businesspersons within the Asia-Pacific region. Currently, non-U.S. business travelers from participating APEC countries can avail themselves of expedited visa processing and access to faster lanes at airports across the APEC region. Remarkably, although American business travelers are not eligible for the card, the benefits are available to non-U.S. citizens for entry into the United States. By passing the legislation, Congress will give American business travelers reciprocal treatment to that which we already offer to travelers from other APEC countries.

Importantly, there will be no cost to the American taxpayer for ABTC and the scrutiny applied to those traveling to the U.S. will not be changed in any way. The legislation calls for cost recovery from a fee charged for the card. The cost will be borne solely by those who think the benefits are worth the price. Allowing Americans to make use of the card does not create security issues because the program is already in use for entry into the United States. Enactment of this legislation will have no effect on the requirement that any business visitor to the U.S. who is a citizen of an APEC member economy (other

than Canada or a country participating in the U.S. Visa Waiver Program) must hold a valid U.S. visa.

In 2007, APEC member economies welcomed the U.S. as a "transitional" member of the APEC Business Travel Card (ABTC) program. "Full" members of the ABTC program -- APEC economies other than the United States, Canada and Russia -- recognize the card as a multiple-entry visa valid for three years and offer dedicated lanes for faster immigration processing at ABTC member international airports. The U.S. does not recognize the ABTC as a visa pursuant to the requirements of U.S. immigration law and the legislation does not disturb that policy in any way. The United States currently provides airport fast lane access and expedited visa processing as a "transitional" member. In effect, the legislation does nothing more than allow Americans to enjoy reciprocity in Asia.

There is a strong argument American security will be enhanced with the passage of this legislation because it requires the U.S. Customs and Border Protection agency to establish eligibility criteria and integrate the ABTC application procedures and issuance standards with other international registered traveler programs. Further, the law would incorporate the card into Customs and Border Protection agency's Global Entry Program, promoting overall enrollment in the Department of Homeland Security's centralized trusted traveler program.

The United States will host APEC in Hawaii in 2011 making this year an especially good time for Congress to act on behalf of American businesses in the Asia. While the ABTC represents a modest piece of the comprehensive strategy to promote U.S. trade and commerce, in these highly competitive times, every effort Washington can make to help businesses increase the exports of American goods and services is important.

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