

Signing of trade pact not imperative

Written by Taipei Times Editorial
Saturday, 05 April 2014 00:40

In the nine months since the cross-strait service trade pact was signed, the government has repeatedly stressed that the Legislative Yuan must ratify the agreement as soon as possible for two key reasons: a delay would hurt the nation's credibility in the international community and benefit South Korea, Taiwan's main export rival, because it is negotiating a free-trade pact (FTA) of its own with Beijing.

Those two arguments seem to have been ignored by the pact's critics, who have largely focused their ire on the damage to the nation's economy and public livelihoods the pact would cause and the risks to the nation's democratic way of life posed by becoming more closely linked to China.

That is too bad, because when President Ma Ying-jeou (馬英九) or other top government and Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT) officials repeat those arguments, why not say: "So what?"

Modern history is full of agreements and treaties that have been signed and never ratified, only ratified after amendments have been made or decades have passed, or never even signed despite years of negotiations.

The US is a major culprit. For example, then-US president Woodrow Wilson was one of the main proponents of the League of Nations, but he was not able to get the US Senate to ratify the league's covenant. More recent examples of US recalcitrance include several UN agreements, such as the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, the Convention on the Law of the Sea and the Kyoto Protocol. For these, either Senate approval was not sought or they have not yet passed.

Sometimes the change of heart has been caused by a change in administrations. Former US president Jimmy Carter signed the Additional Protocol to the Geneva Conventions on the laws of war in 1977 and the SALT II treaty for nuclear reduction in 1979, but years later former president Ronald Reagan's administration announced that it would not ratify either deal.

Despite this track record, the US continues to take part in trade and diplomatic negotiations for

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pacts and treaties, which it may or may not sign or ratify. Has its refusal to ratify some previous agreements lost its credibility in the international community? Sometimes, but other nations recognized that domestic political concerns or changes in administration can derail the best laid plans.

There have also been cases where a nation has ratified an agreement and then withdrawn from it, as Canada did from the Kyoto Protocol in December 2011, a move that took effect a year later.

Closer to home, the South Korean-US free-trade agreement (FTA) is a prime example of a pact that was signed by both parties, but then negotiations had to be reopened because of unhappiness with the terms on both domestic fronts.

The FTA was signed in June 2007, the second round of negotiations was concluded in December 2010 and the two sides signed letters of agreement the following February. The US Congress and the South Korean National Assembly finally ratified the FTA in the fall of 2011 and it took effect in February 2012.

The cross-strait service trade pact as it now stands is hugely problematic for Taiwan and strongly opposed by many Taiwanese.

Since Ma and his posse — and many other politicians and businesspeople — are always talking about Taiwan needing to follow international or global trends, why not follow the example set by the US or South Korea and not ratify the service trade agreement?

Or how about returning to the negotiating table, with greater public input and oversight?

Credibility is earned by keeping your word, but also by being willing to admit when you have made a mistake and trying to rectify the problem. Credibility is lost when you continue to go full speed ahead into the rocks, ignoring others' advice or warnings.

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Source: [Taipei Times - Editorials 2014/04/05](#)