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CREATION OF THE CPTPP SECRETARIAT IN SINGAPORE

As the Comprehensive and Progressive Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) trade agreement readies to enter into force, the focus is starting to shift to institutional issues. In the original negotiations for the TPP and subsequent revisions after the withdrawal of the United States, member governments kept many institutional provisions relatively underspecified. Although the CPTPP contains deeper and broader commitments than most existing free trade agreements (FTAs), the management of the group is largely similar to bilateral FTAs—a series of regular meetings of committees for most chapters capped by a Commission of ministers or senior officials.

For the CPTPP members (Australia, Brunei, Canada, Chile, Japan, Malaysia, Mexico, New Zealand, Peru, Singapore, and Vietnam) such arrangements are likely to be cumbersome. The texts of the agreement run to more than 580 pages, with thousands of additional pages of individual country schedules. Across the early years of the agreement, member governments are meant to be regularly changing policies as tariffs, as one important example, are dropped annually.

The CPTPP is also meant to help coordinate policy better in the future. The regulatory coherence chapter, as an example, is supposed to get members to try to harmonize standards in food, agriculture, and other areas over time. High ambition proved problematic to implement. It was especially difficult to get regulators from different ministries and agencies to cooperate with trade officials in the CPTPP around a broad agenda of increasing market access for members. Instead, this agenda has been largely shifted to a future work program.

To compound the difficulties of managing the sprawling commitments, the CPTPP is meant to be a “living agreement.” This means that changes are supposed to take place on a regular basis to avoid

the problems of other agreements, like the Information Technology Agreement (ITA) at the World Trade Organization (WTO) or the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), which have proven difficult to reopen or update.

One final problem with institutional features in CPTPP is the prospect of new accessions on the horizon. Managing the addition of new members will be complicated, especially as the original negotiating teams for CPTPP have been disbanded.

The most obvious solution to these challenges is the creation of a CPTPP Secretariat. A Secretariat would provide for professional staff with institutional memory to monitor the implementation of the CPTPP. It would assist with capacity building and information sharing across members. It would certainly facilitate the addition of new members in the future.

The most logical location for the CPTPP Secretariat is Singapore. Current CPTPP members span three continents, making it critically important to place the Secretariat in a relatively central location with good transportation links to all current and likely future CPTPP members. As one of the most successful, globally trade-dependent countries on Earth, Singapore provides a real-world example of why trade lanes should be kept open.

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