

## Go-ahead likely for EU-Japan free trade negotiations

The General Affairs Council is expected to give the thumbs up to further talks for an “ambitious” agreement with Japan

By Nathalie Steiwer • 07 May 2014 Last updated 14:19



Abe: "We are committed to reaching an agreement by 2015" - Photo: CE

In a statement adopted after their bilateral summit, held on 7 May in Brussels, the EU and Japan reaffirmed their intention of concluding an “ambitious” free trade agreement and partnership “at the earliest possible time”.

“I trust that the two sides will do their utmost to reach this level of ambition,” assured European Commission President José Manuel Barroso at a press conference. This message will be repeated by Trade Commissioner Karel De Gucht during the 8 May General Affairs Council, which will review the negotiations one year on from March 2013. The member states will only make a decision on continuing discussions over the coming weeks at the trade policy committee, but “signals” coming from the capitals are positive, says a diplomatic source.

“The EU is likely to conclude its assessment process soon and without any glitches,” said Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe. “I indicated during my European tour that we are committed to reaching an agreement by 2015,” he stated.

But before reaching an agreement, Barroso insisted that a high level of ambition needs to be injected across the board. He singled out market access for goods, notably in agriculture, non-tariff measures, public procurement and geographical indications. The Europeans would particularly like to see a reduction in non-tariff barriers in the automobile sector, where Japanese tax puts the brakes on European exports.

In the pharmaceutical sector, the EU hopes that Japan will commit to respecting the existing international agreements. The Japanese regulation on food additives is one of the points of contention.

The European negotiators assure that progress has been made to facilitate the European rail industry’s access to Japanese public markets, currently held up by operational security clauses in the Asian country. This optimism is not shared by the Union of European Railway Industries (UNIFE), which believes that Japan’s commitments do not provide enough “guarantee of transparency and non-discrimination” in public markets at this stage.

In the agricultural sector, the EU would at least like to get more recognition for its geographical indications, particularly for cheese.

The Japanese pointed out that Abe’s government is committed to removing tariff barriers in the agricultural sector by 2018 and that it has kicked off a deregulation process in the electricity, pharmaceuticals and labour market sectors, which will have an impact on access to the Japanese market.