Ex-Australian PM Abbott in India to push trade talks

Discussions had run into trouble over market access for Australian agricultural dairy products and tariffs

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In an effort to restart India-Australia trade talks, former Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott landed in New Delhi on Monday for a four-day visit to meet Ministers and business leaders.

Mr. Abbott is in India as Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison's "Special Trade Envoy for India". Despite an agreement between Prime Minister Narendra Modi and Mr. Morrison in June 2020 that India and Australia would "re-engage" on the Comprehensive Economic Cooperation Agreement (CECA), talks on CECA, which have been suspended since 2015, have made no visible progress.

"Mr. Abbott looks forward to discussions on the India-Australia Comprehensive Economic Cooperation Agreement, which will propel our economic relationship to its full potential, to the mutual benefit of the Indian and Australian people," Australian High Commissioner Barry O'Farrell said, announcing the visit on Monday, describing bilateral ties at an "historic high". "This will be an opportunity to progress Australia's ambitious agenda to energise and expand our bilateral trade and investment relationship with India," a statement issued by the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade also said.

To meet Modi, Goyal

Officials said Mr. Abbott's schedule is still to be finalised, but he is expected to

Tony Abbott

meet Commerce Minister Piyush Goyal and officials of the Commerce Ministry, address business chambers and think tanks in Delhi before he leaves on August 6. Officials did not rule out a meeting with Mr. Modi, who had met Mr. Abbott warmly, calling him a friend during a private visit to India in 2019.

During his first visit as Prime Minister in September 2014, Mr. Abbott had been particularly keen to see the CECA to its conclusion. After talks with Mr. Modi who travelled to Australia two months later, the two leaders had announced they hoped to finalise the deal by the end of 2015.

No progress

"By the end of next year we will have a free trade deal with what is potentially the world's largest market. And I want to make this declaration here in this Parliament: there are two can-do PMs in this chamber today and we will make it happen," Mr. Abbott had told the Australian Parliament in November 2014.

However, the talks ran into trouble over market access for Australian agricultural dairy products, high tariffs and other issues.

After Malcolm Turnbull unseated Mr. Abbott in 2015, progress on the CECA talks slowed down, particularly as talks over the 16-nation ASEAN-led Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), that included Australia and India picked up.

India decided to walk out of the RCEP in 2019, however, and the bilateral CECA negotiations have been pending ever since. Mr. Abbott has been particularly critical of the RCEP agreement, that is expected to come into force on January 1, 2022, calling it the "trade arm of China's Belt and Road Initiative".