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NATIONAL FOREIGN TRADE COUNCIL

STATEMENT of WILLIAM REINSCH BEFORE  
THE  
THE SENATE COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN RELATIONS

HEARING  
ON  
THE RATIFICATION OF INCOME TAX TREATIES AND PROTOCOLS

February 26, 2014

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee:

The National Foreign Trade Council (NFTC) is pleased to recommend ratification of the treaties and protocols under consideration by the Committee today. We appreciate the Chairman's actions in scheduling this hearing, and we strongly urge the Committee to reaffirm the United States' historic opposition to double taxation by giving its full support as soon as possible to the pending Tax Treaty Protocol agreements with Switzerland, and Luxembourg, the Tax Treaties with Hungary and Chile, and the OECD Multilateral Convention on Mutual Administrative Assistance in Tax Matters.

The NFTC, organized in 1914, is an association of some 250 U.S. business enterprises engaged in all aspects of international trade and investment. Our membership covers the full spectrum of industrial, commercial, financial, and service activities, and we seek to foster an environment in which U.S. companies can be dynamic and effective competitors in the international business arena. To achieve this goal, American businesses must be able to participate fully in business activities throughout the world through the export of goods, services, technology, and entertainment, and through direct investment in facilities abroad. As global competition grows ever more intense, it is vital to the health of U.S. enterprises and to their continuing ability to contribute to the U.S. economy that they be free from excessive foreign taxes or double taxation and impediments to the flow of capital that can serve as barriers to full participation in the international marketplace. Foreign trade is fundamental to the economic growth of U.S. companies. Ninety-five percent of the world's consumers are outside of the United States. Tax treaties are a crucial component of the framework that is necessary to allow that growth and balanced competition.

*Advancing Global Commerce for Over 90 Years*

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This is why the NFTC has long supported the expansion and strengthening of the U.S. tax treaty network and why we recommend ratification of the items before you today..

## **GENERAL COMMENTS ON TAX TREATY POLICY**

While we are not aware of any opposition to the treaties under consideration, the NFTC, as it has done in the past as a general cautionary note, urges the Committee to reject any opposition to the agreements based on the presence or absence of a single provision. No process as complex as the negotiation of a full-scale tax treaty will be able to produce an agreement that will completely satisfy every possible constituency, and no such result should be expected. Tax treaty relationships arise from difficult and sometimes delicate negotiations aimed at resolving conflicts between the tax laws and policies of the negotiating countries. The resulting compromises always reflect a series of concessions by both countries from their preferred positions. Recognizing this, but also cognizant of the vital role tax treaties play in creating a level playing field for enterprises engaged in international commerce, the NFTC believes that treaties should be evaluated on the basis of their overall effect. In other words, agreements should be judged on whether they encourage international flows of trade and investment between the United States and the other country. An agreement that meets this standard will provide the guidance enterprises need in planning for the future, provide nondiscriminatory treatment for U.S. traders and investors as compared to those of other countries, and meet an appropriate level of acceptability in comparison with the preferred U.S. position and expressed goals of the business community.

The NFTC wishes to emphasize how important treaties are in creating, implementing, and preserving an international consensus on the desirability of avoiding double taxation, particularly with respect to transactions between related entities. The tax laws of most countries impose withholding taxes, frequently at high rates, on payments of dividends, interest, and royalties to foreigners, and treaties are the mechanism by which these taxes are lowered on a bilateral basis. If U.S. enterprises cannot enjoy the reduced foreign withholding rates offered by a tax treaty, noncreditable high levels of foreign withholding tax leave them at a competitive disadvantage relative to traders and investors from other countries that do enjoy the treaty benefits of reduced withholding taxes. Tax treaties serve to prevent this barrier to U.S. participation in international commerce.

If U.S. businesses are going to maintain a competitive position around the world, treaty policy should prevent multiple or excessive levels of foreign tax on cross border investments, particularly if their foreign competitors already enjoy that advantage. The United States has lagged behind other developed countries in eliminating this withholding tax and leveling the playing field for cross-border investment. The European Union (EU) eliminated the tax on intra-EU, parent-subsidiary dividends over a decade ago, and dozens of bilateral treaties between foreign countries have also followed that route. The majority of OECD countries now have bilateral treaties in place that provide for a zero rate on parent-subsidiary dividends.

Tax treaties also provide other features that are vital to the competitive position of U.S. businesses. For example, by prescribing internationally agreed thresholds for the imposition of taxation by foreign countries on inbound investment, and by requiring foreign tax laws to be applied in a nondiscriminatory manner to U.S. enterprises, treaties offer a significant measure of certainty to potential investors. Another extremely important benefit which is available

exclusively under tax treaties is the mutual agreement procedure. This bilateral administrative mechanism avoids double taxation on cross-border transactions.

The NFTC also wishes to reaffirm its support for the existing procedure by which Treasury consults on a regular basis with this Committee, the tax-writing Committees, and the appropriate Congressional staffs concerning tax treaty issues and negotiations and the interaction between treaties and developing tax legislation. We encourage all participants in such consultations to give them a high priority. Doing so enables improvements in the treaty network to enter into effect as quickly as possible.

#### AGREEMENTS BEFORE THE COMMITTEE

The Swiss and Luxembourg Protocols that are before the committee today update agreements between the U.S. and these countries that were signed many years ago. The Hungary Tax Treaty replaces the previous treaty which was signed in 1979. The Chilean tax treaty is the first bilateral tax treaty between the U.S. and Chile. The OECD Multilateral Convention has been signed by 61 countries. The protocols improve conventions that have stimulated increased investment, greater transparency, and a stronger economic relationship between our countries. The Swiss and Luxembourg treaties strengthen the information exchange provisions to alleviate concerns that U.S. taxpayer information was not accessible by the Internal Revenue Service. We are pleased that the Swiss Protocol provides for mandatory arbitration. We thank the committee for its prior support of this evolution in U.S. tax treaty policy, and we strongly urge you to continue that support by approving all five of these Tax Treaties and Protocols.

The NFTC supports the provision in the Swiss protocol that expands the prohibition on source-country taxation of dividends beneficially owned by pension or other retirement arrangements resident in the other treaty country. Under the Swiss protocol, the prohibition on source-country taxation also applies to dividends that are beneficially owned by an individual retirement savings plan set up in, and owned by a resident of, the other treaty country, so long as the competent authorities agree that the individual retirement savings plan generally corresponds to an individual retirement savings plan recognized in the other treaty country for tax purposes.

The proposed tax treaty with Chile, signed in 2010, would be our first with that country, and its ratification would represent an important milestone in lowering tax barriers to U.S. companies operating in Latin America, where we have few such agreements. The proposed treaty would lower withholding taxes on a bilateral basis and protect the interests of U.S. taxpayers in that country.

The Swiss and Luxembourg treaty protocols, both signed in 2009, would among other measures update the current information exchange provisions with those countries to override their bank secrecy laws. The Swiss Protocol would also enable the U.S. Government to collect U.S. tax revenues from hidden offshore accounts of U.S. tax evaders, while specifically protecting against “fishing expeditions” by either country.

The OECD Multilateral Convention was amended at the request of the G-20 to align it to the international standard on exchange of information. The Convention is a multilateral agreement designed to facilitate international co-operation among tax authorities to improve their ability to tackle tax evasion and avoidance and to ensure full implementation of national tax laws, while respecting the fundamental rights of taxpayers.

Additionally, important safeguards included in the Hungary tax treaty prevent “treaty

shopping”. In order to qualify for the reduced rates specified by the treaties, companies must meet certain requirements so that foreigners whose governments have not negotiated a tax treaty with Hungary or the U.S. cannot free-ride on this treaty. Similarly, provisions in the sections on dividends, interest, and royalties prevent arrangements by which a U.S. company is used as a conduit to do the same. Extensive provisions in the treaties are intended to ensure that the benefits of the treaty accrue only to those for which they are intended.

The Swiss Protocol provides for mandatory arbitration of certain cases that cannot be resolved by the competent authorities within a specified period of time. Following the arbitration provisions already adopted in the Canadian, German, Belgian and French tax treaties, the arbitration provision included in the Swiss Protocol will help to resolve cases where the competent authorities are unable to reach agreement. NFTC member companies view tax treaty arbitration as a tool to strengthen, not replace, the existing treaty dispute resolution procedures conducted by the competent authorities. Although the existing mutual agreement procedures work well to resolve most of the disputes that arise in cases involving Switzerland and the United States, the inclusion of the arbitration provisions in the Swiss Tax Protocol will expedite the resolution of disputes in all competent authority cases. The Swiss Protocol has been ratified by Switzerland, and its approval is essential to resolving hundreds of long-running U.S. tax investigations.

## IN CONCLUSION

Finally, the NFTC is grateful to the Chairman and the Members of the Committee for giving international economic relations prominence in the Committee’s agenda, particularly when the demands upon the Committee’s time are so pressing. We would also like to express our appreciation for the efforts of both Majority and Minority staff which have enabled this hearing to be held at this time.

We urge the Committee to proceed with ratification of these important agreements as expeditiously as possible.