

## **U.S. Senator Maria Cantwell**

### **Washington International Trade Association Discussion with Senator Maria Cantwell and former USTRs Carla Hills and Susan Schwab**

**June 26, 2025**

#### **Sen. Cantwell Opening Remarks**

**[[VIDEO](#)]**

**Sen. Cantwell:** Well, good morning everyone. Ken, thank you so much to the International Trade Association for hosting this. And I'm so grateful to be here with Ambassadors Hills and Schwab, because I think of them as pioneers in a very rules-based, trade-based system that we need to continue to support.

I also want to thank Nasim Fussell, we had a chance to work together and obviously appreciate your leadership as what you're doing now, but as, then, Chief International Trade Counsel to Senator Grassley on the Senate Finance Committee. I think we need a network of Senate Finance former staffers, because they're all over the place, and we need more knowledge on trade-based economy.

Building alliances and expanding trade, I believe, grow stability and create peace. We're in the Ronald Reagan Building, the International Center for President Reagan, who understood the power of alliance building and of trade. He strongly supported NATO as vital to the defense of our democracy and individual liberties, and working with our allies and stressing the promise of free markets, President Reagan helped end the Cold War.

He also championed a Western Hemisphere-wide free-trade zone. In the 1980s, Central America was engulfed in civil wars, political upheaval. Drug lords, cocaine, and various challenges faced South America, but President Reagan knew that increasing lawful trade would provide alternatives and economic opportunities, and change cultures.

I love that I was being driven around by a 21-year-old from Bellingham, Washington, albeit a community on the border with Canada, who said, Senator, everybody knows that trade changes culture. I was like, well, I don't know, a few people have forgotten it in DC, but yes, thank you for reminding me.

In 2007, I traveled to Colombia with Ambassador Schwab as part of the Senate's consideration of the US-Colombia Free Trade Agreement. It continued the legacy of providing economic opportunity to fight the drug trafficking, in addition to opening a \$3 billion market for US exports.

Today, the United States has real economic opportunities in Southeast Asia, Latin America, and Africa, and the Middle East, I believe, alone, is a \$5 trillion market, and at the same time, there are real national security challenges.

In May, Pakistan conducted missile strikes on India, and India conducted retaliatory attacks. This week, obviously, the US engaged in strikes on Iran to prevent it from developing a nuclear weapon, and the ceasefire agreement between Israel and Hamas remains tenuous.

I believe we need more diplomatic solutions for the region, and I think trade could be a part of that.

Many countries in the Middle East want to diversify their economies and are interested in developing artificial intelligence. I will be introducing legislation to authorize the negotiations of a Middle East trade agreement, an agreement focused on information communication technology. It was built upon what Senators McCain and Baucus introduced 22 years ago to create a Middle East trade preference program in support of the US-Middle East free trade area. I happened to travel to that area with them to talk about this.

The legislation that I'm considering would have requirements that partner countries join the Abraham Accords, normalize diplomatic relations with Israel, support reconstruction of Gaza, join in the efforts to support nuclear nonproliferation, and coordinate strong export controls.

I think these are the approaches that we should be taking in alliance building.

Last week marked the 95th anniversary of the enactment of the Smoot-Hawley tariffs, which led to higher costs, foreign retaliation, and deepened the Great Depression. Out of these ashes, generations of Americans, like Ambassadors Hills and Schwab, built a rules-based international trading system to lower tariffs and level the playing field.

So instead of predictable, rules-based trade, this current administration, I believe, is pursuing a more chaotic on again, off again, on again, off again, tariff structure that, in some instances, are higher than even the Smoot-Hawley levels. It has created uncertainty for business and consumers, raised costs, and threatened the supply chain for American manufacturing.

I come from one of the most trade-dependent states in the nation, so every time I go home, this is what I hear. I hear that businesses and the impacts that they could be felt are being felt now, but they could be even more severe in the third and fourth quarters.

The President has promised new deals, calling for 90 trade deals in 90 days. I love these women, but I don't even know if you could have pulled that off. Could you? 90 trade deals?

We will see what happens at these deadlines. And I expect to see an end to non-tariff barriers like discriminatory treatment of US tech companies in Europe and South Korea. The whole issue of fair treatment of US tech companies, in a growing sector of AI and technology, is critically important.

The growers in my state expect to see an end to non-science based phytosanitary restrictions in places like Japan and India and Australia. However, we should be pursuing serious long-term negotiations to reach comprehensive trade agreements to open markets and level the playing fields. Transparent, transparent rules-based trade policies that businesses can see with predictability, so their decisions to invest will increase.

And we can modernize and reform the rules of a 21<sup>st</sup>-century rules-based trading system, but it is not in the interest of the United States, in my opinion, to blow up international rules-based systems that have worked for decades.

Congress does have a Constitutional role. The framers of the Constitution gave Congress the power to set duties and regulate interstate and international commerce. And Congress is closest to the people. We hear from our constituents every day about the challenges that we face.

Right now, we're in cherry season, and I can tell you, the challenges of this, for a product that is a short window, has to get delivered to the market, and it's your whole revenue for the year, and we can't get

the workers or the markets to sell those products, is so frustrating. In the end, it's not that farmers just lose out. Basically, you lose farms, you lose farmers, and we can't afford to have a more concentrated agriculture system than we have today. We need to continue the growth of agricultural opportunities.

Any administration should brief and consult with Congress. These two have done that many times. They had to come up and brief us, and that is before the trade negotiation starts or concludes. They know that that's part of their responsibility. And that is how our constituents get input into the process. We raise these issues with these negotiators, and they take it back to the negotiating table. That, right now, is somewhat absent in this process.

Congress approves trade agreements and has oversight over implementation, and these are important checks and balances in the American system of government. That is why I introduced the Trade Review Act with my colleague, Senator Grassley, to ensure that Congress has a chance to approve new tariffs for any president to make sure trade policies are working for Americans.

We need to grow trade and prosperity and to keep our country competitive in an ever-aligned world. I am for alliance building right now, because in an Information Age, there is more speed at which markets are opened or shut, and shelf space lost, to more competitors in growing economies around the world. We should be building alliances right now.

I will talk about this maybe in the Q&A, but I believe in a technology NATO. If you want to counter somebody who you think is a bad actor, why not create a democracy-based, rules-based technology alliance that says that the democracies of the world and the most sophisticated technology countries don't believe in government backdoors. No one should buy technology products from someone who has a government backdoor.

With that, I will join our panelists, and back to Ken. But thank you all very much.