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Boehner: Iran has 'global ambitions'

By Molly K. Hooper - 05/08/12 11:48 AM ET

Speaker John Boehner (R-Ohio) on Tuesday warned that Iran's "global ambitions" are a threat to democracies in Central and Latin America.

The Speaker told members of the Council of the Americas he wants to see "the entire Western Hemisphere [become] a free enterprise zone — free markets, free trade and free people," but cautioned that Iran could stand in the way.

Boehner, who led a congressional delegation to Latin America earlier this year, said Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's visit to Cuba and Venezuela shows Tehran is looking to establish a foothold in the Americas.

"[Ahmadinejad's] trip underscored the designs Iran has for expanding its influence in Latin America, and its eagerness to forge bonds with governments in the Western Hemisphere that have demonstrated a lesser interest in freedom and democracy," Boehner told the audience of diplomats and international business people.

Boehner made the remarks at an event held by Conference of the Americas, where he was honored with the chairman's award for leadership.

Conference Chairman and former ambassador John Negroponte introduced Boehner at the event, and credited the Speaker with passage last year of trade agreements with South Korea, Colombia and Panama.

"[Boehner] was one of the heroes of congressional passage of the free trade agreements ... last fall. The Speaker insisted that the pending agreement with South Korea would not move without Panama and Colombia," Negroponte said.

Boehner said that when he met with President Obama shortly after his election as Speaker-designate, the two men had a discussion about trade.

"The president mentioned the idea of moving ahead on one of them — probably Korea — and depending on how that went, maybe talking about moving one of the others. I told the president that we needed to move on all of them at once," Boehner said.

The Speaker gave credit to the president for doing just that, leading to the passage of all three agreements in October.

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