

We need to stand by our staunch allies like Colombia

By Daniel W. Christman

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WASHINGTON -- The outcry has been astonishing. On April 10, the House of Representatives voted to shelve the U.S.-Colombia Trade Promotion Agreement. Since then, people from all walks of life -- across the United States and throughout the Americas -- have urged Congress to reverse course and approve the agreement.

Since then, more than 70 leading U.S. newspapers have published editorials criticizing the House action and urging approval of the agreement with Colombia. Not a single newspaper expressed support for the House action.

Heads of state and government from 11 of our Western Hemisphere neighbors -- Canada, Chile, Costa Rica, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Panama, Peru and, of course, Colombia -- also have urged the House to reverse course.

The House vote was mystifying because approval of this fair-trade agreement is overwhelmingly in the interests of American workers and farmers. In equal measure, the agreement is critical to the foreign policy interests of the United States in the strategically important Andean region.

The economic case for the agreement centers on fairness.

Nearly all imports from Colombia enter the U.S. market duty free under the Andean Trade Preference Act, which Congress has renewed repeatedly with support of Democrats, Republicans, the business community and even the AFL-CIO.

By contrast, U.S. exporters face double-digit tariffs when they try to sell their goods in Colombia.

This status quo obviously is unfair to American workers, farmers and businesses. Congress has a duty to look out for the trading interests of American citizens at least as carefully as it does those of our friends and allies overseas.

Colombia's market is enticing: It grew by 7% last year, and, despite its high tariffs, is already a top global export market for U.S. crops such as corn and cotton.

In addition, Congress has the chance to leverage last year's bipartisan breakthrough on new ways to address labor and environmental concerns in trade agreements.

The breakthrough reached last May allowed Congress to approve a similar free trade deal with Peru by a massive 2-to-1 bipartisan majority. The trade agreement with Colombia includes those same guarantees for worker rights and environmental protection.

Opponents of the agreement point to Colombia's history of violence as a reason to vote it down. But where in recent history have we ever seen the kind of progress in quelling violence that Colombia has achieved over the past decade?

The murder rate is at its lowest level in a generation, and kidnappings have decreased by 80%. More than 40,000 fighters have been demobilized as the country's narco-guerrilla groups have lost legitimacy. While drug-trafficking remains a threat, Colombia's leaders have eliminated two-thirds of its opium production.

Colombia's transformation over the past decade is a triumph of brave and principled Colombians whole-heartedly committed to democracy and free enterprise. But it is also a bipartisan triumph for U.S. foreign policy, which lent support through Plan Colombia and trade preferences.

In the end, we have an obligation to stand with Colombia. The United States has few allies in the world that are as steadfast as Colombia. Colombians have stood with us in conflicts from the Korean War and are standing with us again in the ongoing ideological struggle in today's Latin America.

Across the country and the hemisphere, people are asking: What possible benefit can there be in defeating this trade agreement? To allow it to die is to forgo its economic benefits and alienate a close ally. The only reasonable response is for the House to reverse course, and approve the U.S.-Colombia Trade Promotion Agreement.

Daniel W. Christman is senior vice president for international affairs at the U.S. Chamber of Commerce.