

# The Miami Herald

## U.S. back-sliding on Americas trade deals

### OUR OPINION: CONGRESS SHOULD STOP STALLING, APPROVE ECONOMIC PACTS

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The U.S. presidential candidates seem to agree on one thing: If elected, each would work to improve relations with Latin America. This is the sensible position, of course. Latin America is our neighbor, and it is in the U.S. interest that the region prospers.

However, when it comes to free trade, actions speak louder than words. How do the Democratic contenders -- most of whom are members of Congress -- explain that the Democrat-controlled Congress has not approved pending trade agreements with Panama, Peru and Colombia? The message to Latin America is that the United States isn't interested in the region.

The next U.S. president will have trouble enough trying to counter the ill-effects of Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez and his anti-Americanism. Building ties in the region will be harder if Congress fails to approve these trade pacts and neglects future pacts.

#### Anti-drug allies

Panama, Peru and Colombia are among the staunchest U.S. allies in the Americas. They are key to U.S. anti-drug efforts. Among countries that deserve trade agreements with the United States, these three are foremost.

The trade deals already have been scrutinized and vetted, possibly more than any other trade measure since NAFTA. In May, an agreement between House leaders and the White House was hailed as a bipartisan breakthrough that would lead to quick approval. This led to renewed negotiations with the three countries, which agreed to tougher labor and environmental provisions demanded by the Democratic leaders. The White House also agreed to bolster aid and job training in U.S. communities where trade caused job losses. These were good moves.

#### Democrats a hurdle

The three countries and White House did their part. But Congress has yet to approve a trade deal, thanks to Democratic opposition. Ways and Means Committee Chairman Charles Rangel, D-N.Y., and House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif., have made more unreasonable demands.

Enough is enough. Lip service alone won't persuade our friends in Latin America that the United States is serious about helping to spread prosperity. Yes, the trade deals will boost the economies of Panama, Peru and Colombia. But trade boosts local U.S. economies, too. South Florida alone exported \$39.6 billion in products last year mostly to partners in Latin America and the Caribbean.

Pushed by organized labor, congressional Democrats seem increasingly protectionist. But spurning trade partners in Latin America and elsewhere is self-defeating. Shutting out the world won't grow U.S. jobs or improve income equality. The better way is to approve smart trade deals that mitigate ill effects.