

Why Colombia deserves U.S. help

A trade pact is the best way to lower human rights abuses.

By Nancy Birdsall and Susan Segal

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Washington and New York - Between the recent trade pact that cost Mark Penn his slot as a top adviser to the Clinton campaign and the partisan wrangling going on with the Bush administration and Democrats, Americans are getting only the bad news about Colombia.

There is good news, too, and in light of that good news, good reason for Democrats as well as Republicans to approve the United States-Colombia free trade agreement that the House speaker has threatened to block.

True, Colombia is a violent place. For over a generation, Colombians have faced a grisly cocktail of illegality and lawlessness, fostered by a vicious guerrilla insurgency at least tacitly – and in some cases directly – supported by its neighbors. The country has also faced the corrosive impact of the illegal narcotics trade fueled by insatiable global demand. Less than a decade ago, at the end of the last century, Colombia seemed on the brink of failure as a democracy.

But in the face of pending disaster something extraordinary happened. The people of Colombia rallied and, with help from the US, decided they would not give in to the crisis enveloping their nation.

Under a new government, democratically elected, Colombians taxed themselves more to raise resources to establish a state presence across Colombia, the first time this had ever been done. They professionalized their military and police, winning back large swaths of the country once outside government control.

They cracked down on corruption and delegitimized right-wing paramilitaries, dramatically cutting homicides, kidnappings, and guerrilla and paramilitary attacks on innocents including union organizers. At the request of the US they began aggressively extraditing narcoterrorists. They took steps to strengthen their economy and improve global competitiveness. And they stood up to President Chávez of Venezuela, defending open-market democracies and broadly based prosperity rather than the broken-down populism that is stalling the fight against poverty in Venezuela and other Andean nations.

Despite immense odds, the people of Colombia are succeeding, helped by bipartisan financing of successive US administrations and Congress. But they still need support to complete the good work that has begun.

For over 15 years, the US has been almost completely open to imports from Colombia. This was done to give Colombians economic options beyond the narcotics trade and has led to impressive economic gains and the creation of entire industries, such as cut flowers, that help women and single heads of households gain a leg up in the formal economy.

American taxpayers have also assisted by providing more than \$5 billion in support under Plan Colombia. Critical to the Colombian government's efforts to fight violence and drugs, the recently reauthorized Plan Colombia began in the final months of the Clinton administration with strong bipartisan congressional support.

The next logical step in strengthening the US-Colombia relationship is the free- trade agreement. It would open Colombia to US exports and make permanent US openness to Colombian imports, providing the long-term certainty for new investments and job creation that developing nations require to prosper in the global economy. It would lock in a mutually beneficial relationship with one of the strongest allies that the US has in the region – a region in which the citizens of some countries have lost faith in US actions and intentions, supporting leaders that are in some cases openly hostile.

Unfortunately, the looming economic downturn, combined with the presidential election campaign, means US domestic politics could get in the way of the US national interest. But there is a path forward. The administration and Republicans in Congress should work with Democrats on an expanded domestic program of wage insurance and training, in recognition that some American workers need help to adjust to expanding global trade and the technological shifts that in fact have kept the US competitive.

Expanding the Trade Adjustment Assistance Act can provide a down payment on the broader domestic agenda that Democrats want, including reform of healthcare, in order to address American workers' reasonable concerns about job loss in today's global economy.

In turn, Democrats in Congress should withdraw their resistance to this trade agreement, recognizing its potential to contribute to investment, growth, and job creation in Colombia. These, after all, are the key ingredients of development success that elsewhere, when combined with democratic governance, have been the best insurance against human rights abuses and poor enforcement of labor and environmental standards.

That can take us over the rather significant hump now facing us regarding the signal we send to our neighbors not only in Colombia but all over Latin America.

A delay on the vote or, even worse, voting the agreement down would not only put Colombia's progress at risk, it would also put at risk a generation of productive bipartisan US policy in Latin America.

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