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Deal improves U.S. economy, security
BY LAWRENCE J. HAAS

The pending U.S.-Colombia Trade Partnership represents a stark moment of truth for the United States, with huge implications for America's relations with a key regional ally, its influence across Latin America and its efforts to extend freedom and democracy around the world.

The Congress, which is concerned about allegations of human-rights problems in Colombia, has put the trade pact on the back burner. U.S. Rep. Sander Levin, D-Mich., who heads the House Ways and Means Subcommittee on Trade, says he wants changes in it to strengthen labor protections. Meanwhile, Sen. Patrick Leahy, D-Vt., who heads the Senate Judiciary Committee, has put a hold on \$55 million in unrelated military aid.

But Congress is aiming its fire at the wrong target, blaming Colombia's reformist president, Alvaro Uribe, for sins that go back a generation and that he is working courageously to address. In essence, Congress is risking a partnership that is vital to American interests.

The fact is, Latin America faces a choice between two competing visions. One belongs to the United States, which promotes freedom and democracy while fighting terrorism and the ideologies that drive it.

The other comes from Venezuela, whose rabidly anti-American president, Hugo Chavez, has imposed a socialist authoritarianism at home, seeks to extend his model across the region and is building ties with rogue actors like Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

Whether Colombia remains in the U.S. camp and Chávez's momentum is slowed partly depends on whether the United States sticks by Uribe's government. As Colombian Vice President Francisco Santos put it, rejection of the trade pact would "send a message to the eternal enemies of the United States that . . . this is how America treats its allies." Those enemies, including Chávez, would capitalize on that rejection to try to steer U.S. allies to his side.

Colombia is an important test of U.S. loyalty. After all, since his election in 2002, Uribe has done precisely what the United States advocates – provide more safety and prosperity for his people.

On the security front, he has cut a deal with right-wing paramilitary forces, prompting more than 31,000 of them to surrender their weapons. Meanwhile, he is confronting the leftist Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, whose guerrillas have fled from central

Colombia into the jungles. Murders, which were rising when Uribe took office, are down more than a third.

On the economic front, greater safety has laid the groundwork for much more prosperity. Growth, foreign investment, real-estate prices and Colombia's stock market have soared under Uribe. But the trade pact is about more than rewarding Colombia or providing another market for its exports. The pact also offers important economic opportunities for the United States, particularly for manufacturing and farming, which now face high tariffs and other barriers from Bogota.

Uprooting corruption

Has Uribe wiped Colombia clean of corruption? Hardly! In recent weeks, authorities have charged 14 members of Colombia's Congress, seven former members and other top officials with collaborating with the very paramilitary forces that Uribe has been trying to dismantle.

What's notable, however, is that the alleged collaboration largely predates Uribe's presidency. The investigations that generated these allegations are a testament to his commitment to uproot corruption – however much their timing is complicating prospects for the trade pact.

These days, the United States is very unpopular across the world, making it hard for many governments to work with us. U.S. difficulties in Iraq, meanwhile, have raised questions about America's staying power.

Our allies and enemies are watching for clues to whether we will stick by our commitments on the world stage. How Congress treats the Colombia trade pact will offer an important signal. Anything less than a strong endorsement will do the United States great harm.

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