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Democrats should ratify Colombia trade deal
By Lawrence J. Haas

House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's recent decision to kill the U.S.-Colombia Trade Promotion Agreement, at least for now, sacrifices an issue of enormous national strategic importance at the altar of the bitter partisan politics that have become all too common in today's Washington.

She would be well-advised to reconsider. Her action not only will weaken America's posture around the world, it also will revive fears that the Democratic Party cannot be trusted to manage U.S. national security at a time of rising global challenges.

Internationally, the issue is U.S. credibility – to fulfill our commitments to other nations, to stand by our friends, to recognize and confront our enemies, and to maintain our historic leadership role in bringing the blessings of free markets and democracy to more people in more places.

The United States and Colombia signed the agreement in late 2006, scrapping tariffs for a host of U.S. agricultural, industrial, and consumer products, liberalizing trade in services, expanding U.S. investment opportunities, and upholding labor and environmental standards.

Colombia's congress ratified it last year. Rather than allow our Congress to do the same, Pelosi decided to bottle it up indefinitely, rallying Democrats to change House rules – which have been in place for over 30 years – that would have forced a vote in the coming months.

That sends a chilling signal about our staying power – not only to would-be trading partners from the developing world, but to allies like Japan that wonder whether we will continue leading the Asian alliance in the face of a rising China, and to moderate governments in the Middle East that wonder whether we will protect them from Iran's hegemonic ambitions.

That the signal was sent via Bogota was particularly startling, for the trade deal raises a host of issues about America's staying power. That the deal involves our relations with South America, over which the United States has claimed a "sphere of influence" since the Monroe Doctrine of 1823, will plant seeds of doubt even more firmly in capitals across the world.

Colombia's President, Alvaro Uribe, is bringing prosperity and civil order to a society that once had little of either by following the free market model while cracking down on left-wing guerillas and right-wing paramilitary groups.

Economic growth and living standards are up, the rule of law has a wider reach, and human rights are better upheld. Drug trafficking, kidnappings, and murders of labor leaders are all down, while the government is convicting more murderers and providing more protection for more labor leaders than ever before.

Has Uribe solved every problem? Hardly. As critics note, murders against unionists spiked in early 2008. But the way to address the problem is to stick by Uribe, who is trying to do the right thing, not to abandon him by killing the trade deal and, in the process, encouraging insurgents that are out to destroy him.

Also hoping to destroy him is Venezuela's Hugo Chavez, who supports the terrorist Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) and who is working with leaders in Bolivia and Ecuador to build a regional anti-American compact that rejects free markets and promotes authoritarian socialism.

Chavez is strengthening his ties to Iran as well, providing a hemispheric beachhead to a regime that's becoming our most serious long-term national security challenge. Just as Tehran is testing our resolve in Iraq, the mullahs are watching whether we stand by a besieged ally closer to home.

Back in Washington, meanwhile, the Democratic Party is sending an important election-year signal to its domestic audience.

From Franklin Roosevelt through at least John F. Kennedy, Democrats have been the party of free traders, led by Presidents who understood that prosperity lies with more trade, not less. President Clinton revived that legacy, making trade a key piece of his economic program.

By pursuing trade, Clinton reassured Americans that a Democrat was again ready to lead the free world. A retreat from the Colombia trade deal – a retreat backed by the party's two presidential candidates – will send just the opposite signal to voters who want a brighter future.

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