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Opinion

Colombian Trade Deal: A Bipartisan Boon for Obama By LAWRENCE HAAS

President Obama is focusing heavily on how to make progress with the new Congress on budget and tax issues, but the more logical place for him to seek early bipartisanship is on trade – specifically, on the U.S.-Colombia Trade Promotion Agreement.

The pact, which Congress must ratify, would be a winner for the president and the nation in at least three ways. It would boost the economy and create jobs; it would help reposition Obama at the center of the political spectrum; and it would strengthen America's national security.

Congressional approval is long overdue. The pact dates back to 2006 and arose from two years of negotiations between the administrations of President George W. Bush and Colombian President Alvaro Uribe, a strong U.S. ally.

For the United States, the deal would eliminate duties on 80 percent of U.S. exports of consumer and industrial products to Colombia immediately, and the rest within a decade. Duties would end immediately for high quality beef, cotton, wheat, soybean meal, many fruits and vegetables (including apples, pears, peaches, and cherries), many processed foods (including frozen French fries and cookies), and textiles and apparels that meet certain requirements. U.S. firms in most service sectors would get immediate access to Colombia's markets, including telecommunications, financial services, construction, all professional services and energy.

For Colombia, the deal would make permanent the duty-free treatment that most Colombian exports to the United States now enjoy under the temporary Andean Trade Promotion and Drug Eradication Act. That would support foreign investment in Colombia, hundreds of thousands of jobs, and the nation's economic growth.

Obama says he supports the treaty, yet he is not willing to fight for it. Outgoing White House press secretary Robert Gibbs told reporters last month that the president won't send the pact to Capitol Hill because "it doesn't have the votes." With labor unions strongly opposed to a trade deal that they view as a threat to their members' jobs, the president has apparently concluded that he should avoid this fight.

If so, the president is wrong. Here's why:

Economically, the nation needs more trade, not less. Trade may threaten some existing U.S. jobs, but economists on the left and right generally agree that trade creates more high-paying jobs over the long run. It's no coincidence that the global economy has grown in the post-World War II period along with the vast expansion of trade during the same period.

In this deal, the United States would win far more than Colombia. As the Brookings Institution's Mauricio Cardenas wrote recently, "Ninety percent of Colombian exports already enter the U.S. duty free" under current law, "while U.S. goods face tariffs of up to 20 percent in Colombia."

Thus, while this deal would help Colombia a little, the U.S. International Trade Commission claims it would help America much more by boosting U.S. exports and, in turn, the economy. Without it, the United States will remain at a competitive disadvantage with the European Union and Canada, both of which have approved free trade deals with Colombia.

Politically, the Colombia pact could prove a huge gift for Obama, much as the North America Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) was to President Clinton.

Just as Clinton pushed NAFTA through Congress largely with Republican votes, Obama could do the same with the Colombia deal in a Republican-run House and a slightly Democratic (and largely pro-trade) Senate. A battle with organized labor could give Obama the centrist bona fides he needs to help convince independent voters — who have abandoned the President in droves since 2008 — to give him another look.

The AFL-CIO and other labor groups say Colombia doesn't deserve the pact, largely because of that nation's long history of anti-labor violence and disregard for workers' rights. But, due to Uribe's actions, murders and other violence against trade unionists have fallen dramatically while, as Human Rights Watch confirms, convictions for anti-labor crimes have risen significantly. Colombia also has grown much safer for the population at large as murder, kidnapping, and terrorism have plunged.

That, in fact, leads to the issue of national security. Latin America is split between two competing visions — U.S.-led democracy and free markets and an anti-American "21st century socialism" that Venezuelan strongman Hugo Chavez is promoting with help from his allies in Bolivia, Nicaragua and Ecuador.

Under Uribe, Colombia aligned itself closely with the United States, strengthening the rule of law while confronting the violent Marxist insurgency known as the FARC, as well as paramilitary forces within the country. Congressional approval of the pending trade deal would signal that the United States recognizes those efforts and appreciates Colombia's role as a stalwart U.S. ally in a turbulent region.

In fact, a U.S. signal of this kind is growing increasingly important. Colombia's new leader, Juan Manuel Santos, who replaced Uribe in August, threw his nation's foreign policy into doubt recently by stating that he seeks closer ties with Chavez. Continuing U.S. delay in ratifying the trade deal only gives Santos more reason to loosen Bogota's ties to Washington and seek allies elsewhere.

Obama's pronouncements on trade have fluctuated greatly since his 2008 campaign. While battling for the Democratic presidential nomination, he joined calls to unilaterally reopen

NAFTA because of its alleged failures. Once he secured the nomination, he dismissed such talk as overheated campaign rhetoric.

Obama did little to promote trade in his first year, but in early 2010 he proposed to double U.S. exports over the next five years. He recently completed and is now promoting a bilateral U.S. trade deal with South Korea. But, along with the Colombia pact, he is letting a trade deal with Panama languish.

The Colombia deal gives the president an unusual opportunity to help himself, the economy and America's national security. He should move on it.